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Chapter 1

Mapleshade moved through the thick layers of bracken covering the wooden floor, Patchkit's scruff gripped in her teeth and her two other kits bundling on behind her. Finally, they had made it to the Riverclan border, only a raging river not standing in their way. The river borrowed through the territories like a weaving snake, letting nothing get in its way. Patchkit had to be carried for too long, starting to squirm and whimper, forcing her to put him down.

Mapleshade twisted her head, glaring by into the woodland landscape, looking for any glimpses of movement of pelts. Paranoid, they could be attacked by an enraged Thunderclan patrol at any moment. Knowing that some of her traitorous former Clanmates thought exile was too good for Half-bloods. Which disgusted her.

Patchkit hung his head and tail low in sorrow, "Why does Thunderclan hate us, mother? Why do we have to leave? What do we do wrong?", spending a wave of questions at her. "We did nothing wrong.", Mapleshade growled, "It's them that's the problem, not us!", losing her temper slightly. She turned away from him before she made things worse, "Good for nothing fox hearts.", she muttered under her breath. Sitting down on the sandy earth, she tried to clear her head. Then she felt tiny paws grip her leg as Larchkit reared up on his back legs to meet his mother's eyes, "But we want to go back. I want to go back to camp and the nursery.". Mapleshade shook her head, "Forget about camp. Forget about the nursery. We are outcasts now, you need to understand that. We can't go back. Or they'll hurt us if we do.".

Petalkit took a step closer to the rushing water, staring at it with eyes the sizes of moons. "Do we have to swim in there again?", the she-cat asked nervously. Mapleshade paused looking down at the speeding current, "Not yet.", using her tail to draw her kit away from the edge. The water hissed and spat as it slammed against the rocky shore. The river was a lot higher then she remembered, completely submerging nearby reeds under its murky surface. Her

worry only grew as her gaze drifted upstream. She hissed, the stepping stones had been completely submerged as well! Only two pathetic grey stumps were left managing to peek up above the useless waves is trying to cross.

It would be lucky if she made it across in one piece herself, let alone tiny 2 moon old kits. She had to consider her options carefully if she didn't want anyone being washing away or drowning. She could try and take them over one by one but Oakstar had only given her until Sunhigh to leave and the sun was already flying high in the sky. It would take too long, putting them too at risk of being attacked by a patrol. Or she could carry one while the other swam by her- Was she mouse brained? They wouldn't survive that. She decided to go for broke, simply combining the two ideas together.

She crouched down at the river's edge, "Larchkit, Petalkit, climb on my back.", she told them. They seemed confused but didn't question it as they wriggled on top of her. When they were both in position, surrounded by her patchy thick fur. "Ok, now listen to me because this is very important.", she explained, with both of their full attention, "You must hold onto me as tightly as you can, use your claws to grip me.". Petalkit obediently nodded but Latchkit began to look distressed, "But won't that hurt you?". Mapleshade shook her head, trying not to give away how scared she was herself, "Don't worry about me, just make sure to use your claws, as deep as they will go.".

She winced slightly as thorn-like claws dug into her flesh while they shifted around, preparing themselves. As she began to stand on long legs, Patchkit leapt in front of her, "What about me?", he asked blinking. Not bothering to say anymore, she leaned down and took him by the scruff once more. Luckily, no one was making a fuss. With a final deep sigh, Mapleshade took her first step into the water. Immediately, even with little as a paw in, she felt the immense strength of the current. It was also bitterly ice cold, as it crept down into her bones. The gravel under her paws shifted and shield as it gave under her weight. She dug her claws into sandy shoreline as she took one strenuous step after the other. It was already this harsh and she hadn't even made it halfway. For a

heartbeat, she felt tempted to leap back onto to the safe dry land but quickly banished those thoughts to the back of her mind. There was no going back now!

She plagued into the deep end, submerging almost her entire body, all but her neck, head, and precious cargo. She felt the claws digging into her neck, go deeper. Her fur become soaked as it absorbed the water, weighing her down. It felt like she was carrying a pile of pebbles in her stomach. Patchkit let out whales of terror as the waves began to reach out for his dangling legs. She strained her muscles, trying to raise her head further from the brown swirling liquid that threatened her kit's life. Patchkit's whales faded to a timid whimper.

Mapleshade's eyes glanced over to the nearby shore, layers of foam were building up against the jagged rocks, like thick yellowish walls of fog blocking her escape. Speckles of dirty water, splashed up into her amber eyes, the salty texture of it making her eyes sting. She needed to get out this river quickly. Gathering up her strength, she kicked hard at the blue void, heaving herself across the river. Slowly she got into a rhythm like running across the Thunderclan forest, darting after squirrels; kick, pause, kick, pause. Mapleshade was making better progress now, she was over halfway now. Just a bit further- However her long strides with brief pauses for critical moments of rest soon turned to frantic paddling. She going in the opposite direction she wanted! A swift undercurrent had grasped her, taking her with it. Deshight how much she fought it, how much she willed it, she couldn't win against it.

She kicked harder and harder, the water dragging her quicker and quicker, tiring her faster and faster- A hard grey subject stabbed into her throat as she slammed against one of the sharpened edges of the stepping stones. There was movement from above her as Larchkit and Petalkit jerked at the sudden impact, barely holding on. Pain surged through her as the sharp rock dug into her windpipe.

In that heartbeat, her own body betrayed her. She couldn't help it. The urge was just too great. Her mouth slipped open as she let out a cry of agony, with Patchkit sent hurling towards the raging water. In unison, the family cried out for their falling member, "Patchkit!",

as he was swallowed up, dragged under the water's surface. Mapleshade watched helplessly as he flailed desperately to keep above the surface but the current kept dragging him under. Only rarely did his small ginger head bobbed up to get a few important moments to gasp for air. He was being taken away so fast, downstream, it was like a dream. She was dazed.

No! Just before Mapleshade ungripped from the safety of the stepping step, to go after him, there was movement on the far bank. There was a flash of creamy brown. ***Appledusk!*** Her heart soared as her mate darted forward like a fox and plunged into the river after their son. His brown fur disappearing into the swirling blue depths of the river. Move pelts emerged from the swishing reeds of Riverclan's territory, the warriors looked stunned at the strange scene of; Mapleshade clinging on the stepping stone while two kits whaled on her head as they cried out for their brother.

Diving in, they swam towards her, gliding through the rampaging river with ease as a Windclan cat would almost fly over the moors. Larchkit and Petalkit handled together as a pale tom and grey tabby she-cat took placed on either side of Mapleshade. The smell of fish clung to her nose. Her fur bristled as they clamped her down with their flanks, dragging her the last of the way across the river. Her instincts told her to claw their ears off but she didn't. It was against everything she'd been told as she grew up; Riverclan was the foe and they wouldn't hesitate to attack you. But she couldn't, this may be her only chance of living.

Relief flooded over as she began to feel a hard surface under her paw pads again. Safety at last. As they went into the swallows, the pale tom, Splashfoot bit down into her neck fur and forcefully yanked her out the water, throwing her against the shore. She let out a yowl of surprise and anger. Both kits were sent tumbling off her back, rolling onto the ground. When Larchkit and Petalkit saw their mother begin to sit up, they scrambled between her legs, getting to the shelter of her belly. Their heads popped out from under her, nervously, their ears pricked and noses twitching. Mapleshade had her ears flatten, ready for the Riverclan cats' imminent threats. But surprisingly, Eletail's and Splashfoot's attention wasn't on her, instead, their eyes were upstream. Then it

hit her like a falling tree, "Why hasn't Appledusk returned with Patchkit yet?", she demanded.

As she wildly glanced around, she flinched as Frecklewish emerged onto the Thunderclan shore, ears twitching with confusion. The speckled cat halted suddenly, as she noticed the fierce flood, violently trembling. Anger grew in Mapleshade as she overheard the coward's words, "I can't do this - I'll only make it worse. Not like Birchface!". Before she could yowl at Frecklewish, she fled into the bushes, not giving the Riverclan patrol a second thought. How much had she'd seen without bothering to help? Mapleshade questioned bitterly. Patchkit was still missing!

Luckily, Appledusk finally gripped the rocks, heaving himself out of the water. With a white and ginger bundle in his mouth. **Patchkit was safe!** Both cats were soaked to the bone and dripping wet, leaving a trail behind them like a slug as Appledusk padded towards the small crowd of cats. Appledusk gently dropped the kit on the floor. Mapleshade dived on Patchkit, protectively wrapping her paws around him and grooming him down. He violently shivered and was stiff with cold. Coughing up mouthfuls of water. She licked him more, desperately trying to warm him. Whispering into his ear, "I'm sorry, little one. I'll never let you slip from my paws like that ever again. I promise.".

Larchkit and Petalkit went up to their brother, relief scent arose from them. "Make sure not to go on crazy adventures like that, without me next time.", Larchkit teased playfully, prodding at his brother's nose. Patchkit gave off a weak smile.

"Thank you-", she began to raise her head to her mate, Appledusk but her words were cut off. Instead of seeing a warm welcoming grin she expected, his green eyes were filled with anger. He opened his mouth slowly, so only she could hear his hushed message, "You've could have gotten them killed."

As she lay there; with her kits in her arms, her heart, which was soaring only a few heartbeats ago, was sinking like a boulder. How could he accuse her of that? Their kits were alive and safe in the end! Shouldn't that be the only thing that mattered? Wasn't he pleased to see them? Wasn't he pleased to see her?

"What were you thinking!?", a loud and angry she-cat's voice rang throughout the whole forest, breaking into Mapleshade's swarming clouds of dark thoughts. Mapleshade turned sharply to meet the glare of Eletail, both of their tails lashing. Mapleshade knew this cat from reputation alone; Senior Warrior, Retired queen, mentor of three separate apprentices and proud mother of two successful litters. Her greying muzzle and battle-worn pelt certainly showed that. Eeltail continued her rant, "Making kits swim in a river? With high currents? One of them almost drowned!", her eyes flickering towards Patchkit. *She didn't make them swim, she carried them, Larchkit and Petalkit were almost completely dry,* Mapleshade thought her unspoken argument.

"You know, it just shows how terrible of mother you are, when the enemy has to save your own kit.", she muttered. Mapleshade's fur flared, claws scraping across the stone under her paws. *How dare you!* Mapleshade secretly shouted in her head. But she fought back the snarl forming in her throat. Despite how much she hated it, she had to remain calm and friendly if she wanted any chance of being accepted into Riverclan and giving her kits a future.

What she did and said in those next few moments could decide everything. Eeltail flicked her tail tip and tried to nose Mapleshade to her paws, "Come on.", Eeltail urged sternly, "You or your kits shouldn't be on Riverclan territory. We know a better way around the river, you can return home safely from there.". Just as Eletail and Splashfoot began to pad away, expecting Mapleshade to follow, she mewed, "I can't.". Splashfoot halted, turning his head over his broad shoulder, "I'm sorry, what?".

Mapleshade sat up, puffing up her chest. "We were kicked out by Oakstar.", she explained, "We can't go back to Thunderclan anymore.". The two Riverclan warriors looked at each other, confused. Appledusk continued to hover in the background. Splashfoot took a step forward, sniffing curiously at the kits huddled together behind Mapleshade's front legs, "So why did you bring them here?".

Mapleshade let out a long-lasting sigh. Her blood boiling from the growing dreed of the terrifying moment that loomed over her. No going back now. She glanced at Appledusk, still as silent and stiff as

a frozen tree trunk. "I was hoping you could let us join Riverclan.", she simply said. Splashfoot snorted, "And why would we take in Thunderclan exiles?", he mewed with a taunting tone. Swallowing back another sigh, Mapleshade readied herself for the answer that would change everything. There was no point in lying now. She twisted her tail around her kits, protecting them if something went wrong. "Because those ain't just Thunderclan kits. They've got Riverclan blood in them as well!", she declared. Eeltail's muscles strained, "How?", she snarled.

"Because Appledusk is their father!", she announced. The truth was out...

All eyes widen in shock, including the two Riverclan warriors and her own kits. Even Appledusk shifted uneasily in his sitting position, surprised that she had the guts to tell their ultimate secret like that. Splashfoot twisted on his front paw to directly face his clanmate, his smokey grey tail bushed up, making him look as a huge as a Lionclan warrior. "Traitor!", he yowled, lunging, claws first, straight towards the brown tom. Then Eletail ran in, rearing up and grabbing Splashfoot by the scruff mid-air and slamming him onto the hard earth. The struggling cat spat in hatred, "Why are you defending him?".

Eeltail had her fur on end and ears flatten, clearing finding it hard not to rip the fur off of Appledusk herself. Ignoring the cat flailing under her weight, her attention turned to Appledusk, "Is it true? Are you the father of Mapleshade's kits?", she asked while growling. Appledusk took while before answering, his expression blank, "Yes.", he finally admitted. Petalkit dashed from under Mapleshade before she could grab the she-kit. Petalkit stared at Appledusk with wide eyes. "You can't be our father!", she shouted. It pained Mapleshade to see her daughter like this, "I'm sorry Petalkit, but he is your father.", trying to soothe the distressed young cat. "But I don't want him to be my father. He smells funny and all the elders were telling me how he's the one who killed Birchface and Flowerpaw!".

Larchkit joined in beside his sister, facing Mapleshade while Patchkit crowded under her, "We don't want a killer as a father!". All the cats around the kits looked at them, speechless. Guilt

flooded over Mapleshade. Maybe she should never let Appledusk be the father of her kin, if it caused them this much shame and horror. Surprisingly, Appledusk finally spoke properly, coming to his own defence, "It was an accident. I would never kill a warrior, let alone an apprentice, out of cold blood like that.". Both kits remained silent.

No one dared move. It felt as if time itself had stopped. Splashfoot had finally calmed down, going limp, so Eletail stopped pinning him down, allowing him to stand. Eeltail bared her white longs fangs, "We're taking you and your kits back to camp. Only Darkstar will know how to deal with this situation.". Mapleshade hesitantly nodded, "Very well.".

The group set off, leaving the river behind them and padding into the tree-line. Mapleshade felt slightly relieved to get away from the thing that had almost taken her kits away forever. With Eeltail marching on ahead and Splashfoot at the rear to make sure no one tried to make an escape, leaving Mapleshade and Appledusk to awkwardly walk side by side. She wanted to say something but didn't want to risk making anything worse. Instead, she made a more subtle move, twinning her thick tail with his long short-haired one. No one noticed but Appledusk. He gave off a sad yet for some reason guilty smile.

Chapter 2

A hunched up Larchkit was grasped in her mouth. Out of all of her kits, she feared he was most likely do something outrageous. He was pulling off a strop, tightening up in annoyance. Patchkit and Petalkit stayed as close to Mapleshade as possible, scared of this alien territory. They'll get used to it once we're here for a while, she told herself. They were heading to the camp now, all she needed to do was get their sympathy. Maybe, just maybe, getting exiled was a part of a destiny for greater things.

Swirling clouds unspeakably high above her head, threaten to cover the warmth of the sun and to place a sheet of shadows over the land. The territory around her was unfamiliar. The ground should be dry and sandy but instead, it was damp and marshy under her paws pads. Without packed trees to create a forest, it was pale wide plain, dotted with islands of protruding rocks.There wasn't a spot in this territory where you could avoid the faint gushing sound of rushing water.

The holes left by Larchkit and Petalkit's claws, where they had gripped her, had started to bleed. Small Streams of red were running down her ginger, black and white fur now. With Patchkit keeping on glancing up at them, it made Mapleshade begin to get uneasy, but Patchkit still didn't say a word. She had much more important things to deal with. Getting herself healed should be an afterthought. After wandering down another slope, two streams came into view, uniting at the edge of the horizon, creating a blue-ringed circle. In the center, was a tangle of long grasses and reeds, that stood above them. Mapleshade's ear twitch. The salty fishy scent of Riverclan overpowered any other odors that could have been lingering about this place. Finally, they arrived. The Riverclan camp.

She placed Larchkit gently on the ground. All three of her kits sat neatly in a row, just a whisker-length away from her muzzle, "Make sure to stay close to me at all times. Don't wander off and don't say

anything. I'll take care of everything, don't you worry.", she mewed softly, trying to remain hopeful in this bleak looking situation. All three kits nodded. Splashfoot marched ahead, "Come on.", he ordered harshly, approaching the reeds with Eletail already disappearing inside. As the pale warrior passed Appledusk, he angrily swiped his tail across his clanmate muzzle, muttering, "Now you'll answer for what you've done.", under his breath. Appledusk replied with a hiss as sharp as a snake's. The two mates shared a pitiful glance before both entered the forest of reeds. The long brown leaves were swept aside as Mapleshade took long strides to flatten it, making a path for her kits. But they still had to stumble over the fallen reeds, like logs for a fully grown cat.

They must've been exhausted by now. They've been through more than any cat should in a lifetime, let alone, in one day as kits; being exiled for something they couldn't help, dragged across a river, having one of them almost drown and learning their father wasn't Birchface. Even then, it still wasn't over, they still had to be accepted into Riverclan. Once they were in their new home, Mapleshade would take them to a nice clean nest and they could have a long needed rest. The earth under Mapleshade become not just marshy but was now swallow muddy stagnant water. Her paws were now covered in a layer of green mud. However unlike her, where it only went up her paws, the mud stretched up, all the way up to the kits' bellies. Just a bit further.

After traveling through the reeds for another fox-length, the tall plants began to space out before stopping eventually to make way for a large clearing. The entire camp was built on a slowly arching slope, walls blocking the views of the outstretching marsh grasslands just beyond their sight. The dens were made from tightly woven and packed reeds and twigs. Sedges surrounded the edges of the clearing, to make it's own isolated island. The ancient willow that stood at the side of the clearing, was a towering figure among the tangle of different grass types.

The ground here, turned to cracked well-worn sandy stone, showing a history of countless floods.

Lots of cats were already outside of their dens, getting on with their own business, eating large fish or sharing tongues. However once

they spotted the approaching tortoiseshell and kits, many of them got up to their paws, uneasy. Not aggressive yet but certainly unwelcoming. Larchkit looked around wildly, a growl forming in his throat. Mapleshade lay her tail over his shoulders, shaking her head at her son. Larchkit stopped, joining his littermates in a huddle beside their mother. Eeltail pointed out a rock tucked away behind a layer of undergrowth, "You and your kits wait there while I fetch Darkstar.". Before rushing over to a cluster of stems woven into the roots of the ancient Willow. As Mapleshade waited, the Riverclan warriors muttered suspiciously behind her. More cats were beginning to sense the presence of Thunderclan scent and beginning to poke their heads out the den entrances. There was a stir of movement from inside the Leader den as a black shape emerged from its shadows. Darkstar stood with a strong posture.

Mapleshade's mate puffed up his chest as his leader padded up to them. "Appledusk, what's going on? Why is Mapleshade he-", Darkstar paused. Then the Riverclan leader's nose began twitching as she scented something, lowering her head. Mapleshade shifted, showing Darkstar the fear-filled kits behind her. "Why are kits here? They should be in the Nursery.", she pointed out. Appledusk took a step forward, surprisingly calm, "Those kits are mine.", he announced. Around the whole camp, yowls and hisses filled the air. A specked elder even yelled out in the far back, of the now gathered crowd, "Traitor!". This was it. Appledusk would be able to explain on the kits' behalf; that they truly had a place among the Riverclan warriors. Darkstar's eyes narrows, "Explain.". Appledusk bowed his head respectfully, "Please forgive me.". A she-cat separated from the ring of watching cats, bounding out to Appledusk. Reedshine.

"What are you saying, Appledusk?" she asked, pressing herself against Appledusk's thick slick pelt. Mapleshade's mind become numb in that heartbeat. The way they leaned against each other- they were more than Clanmates. Bitter frost of jealousy was beginning to form at the bottom of Mapleshade's heart. "It's true Reedshine. I'm sorry.", Appledusk whispered. Reedshine staggered away from him, turning her head to Mapleshade. She looked down at the kits, lost for words.

Darkstar stood face to face with her trusted senior warrior,

"*Appledusk*, explain yourself this instant.", she repeated, her patient being tested. Appledusk began to explain, "A few moons ago, I-meet Mapleshade in secret and she ended up getting pregnant.". Darkstar remind silent, not having any questions yet, so Appledusk carried on, "Mapleshade said she would raise them in Thunderclan and we've led separate lives since, we though it was best for everyone. I knew I betrayed my clan- so I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone.".

Darkstar attention went to the former Thunderclan warrior, her stare judging, "So why have you brought them here?", tail twitching. Mapleshade's teeth gritted together, now it was her turn, she'd had to get this right, "Ravenwing managed to discover the truth. So Oakstar exiled me and my kits. I would be unspeakably grateful if you were able to let my kits join your Clan. They still have Riverclan blood in them.".

By now, the Riverclan deputy, Spiketail had joined them, sitting beside his leader. What was he thinking of all of this? Then Appledusk dipped his cream coloured head, eyes closed, "Please Darkstar, I understand now, I was being a fool. I should've never met Mapleshade against the code. My selfish mistake that costed those kits their exile. I'll regret that for the rest of my life.", he mewed, "The kits have nothing to with this. So I can only speak for myself and beg for your forgiveness. My loyalty is with Riverclan. I want to remain here to serve the cats I love.".

Mistake? Regret? Mapleshade's ears were pricked, she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Was he trying to pin the blame on her? He came willingly to their meetings! Anger sparked inside her, "How dare yo-", but a tail was flattened against her open jaw as Spiketail shut her up, "Hush. We're not going to solve this by shouting.". Mapleshade forced herself to be quiet. She couldn't ruin this for herself. She took the chance to check on her kits; Patchkit was crouched down on the crusted soil while Petalkit and Larchkit looked up with shocked faces and they were looking directly at her. Mapleshade blinked. They were scared of their own mother.

Slowly, Appledusk began to plead his cause again once things had calmed down. Mapleshade waited for what fox-dang excuse he came up with next. "Please, leave the kits out of this. Just judge me

and I'll prove my loyalty again.", Appledusk muttered.

Spiketail and Darkstar looked at each other, reading each other. Spiketail nodded, seemly agreeing with the cream tom, "Appledusk is a brave and strong warrior and so would any kits he's fathered. It would be a waste to let them go.", the graying elderly deputy stood directly in front of the brown tom, "I'm willing to give him a chance.", smiling. Appledusk gave a grateful smile back. Were they being allowed to join? Reedshine padded up alongside him, their fur brushing like weeds growing around each other. "Spiketail's right. Appledusk is the most loyal warrior in Riverclan.". Despite how much Reedshine annoyed Mapleshade, she was grateful for her support. With two Riverclan cats on their side, including the deputy, made it all the more likely of giving her kits a future.

Silence hung over all the cats in the clearing like a fog. All of it now hinged on Darkstar's decision. She remained thoughtful for a heartbeat, a frown came over her face, until eventually shaking her head. Mapleshade's hope shattered. "I can't agree with you there, Spiketail.", she mewed. Panic came over Reedshine, her fur beginning spike up.

Appledusk remaining calm until now, took a step forward, "What?", he snapped. Darkstar looked coldly at him, her blue eyes darken as if rain clouds gathered there, "I'd like to give you that benefit of the doubt but I can't. By taking a mate from another clan, you've betrayed your Clan and the Warrior code.". Reedshine gasped while the Riverclan warriors yowled their agreement in the background. But Mapleshade could barely hear any of them. Darkstar was kicking Appledusk out? But what about, Patchkit, Larchkit and Petalkit? They were too young. They needed to raised in a clan.

Mapleshade darted forward, leaving her kits beside an enraged Appledusk. She stood nose to nose with the pitiful Riverclan leader, "What about my kits?", she demanded impatiently. "Kits belong with their mother, even if that's exile.", Darkstar argued. Mapleshade growled at her, feeling the urge to rip her fur off. "Send me away if you wish. But they need a home!". Yet again, Darkstar shook her head. The memorizes of her Thunderclan trial flooded over her - Including Frecklewish running away from the flood when Patchkit was still missing. This couldn't happen twice in the same day! How

could the Clans be so cruel!

Mapleshade reared up onto her hind legs, about to slash down on Darkstar's head. However, teeth grasped her scruff and she was thrown backwards. She was sent flying, her kits had to scatter like ants to avoid their mother crashing into them. The air was forced from her lungs, a small dust cloud was created as she landed. Sand went up into her mouth and nose, causing her to cough. "Pin her down!", Mapleshade heard when her senses were still blurred. Spiketail and a warrior, called Milkfur, dashed over hurriedly, taking hold of the she-cat. Mapleshade furiously thrashed out but with the strength of two warriors, they overpowered her, keeping her subdued. "Mother!", Petalkit cried out.

The cats around her carried the conversation like nothing happened. Appledusk did his best not to hiss, "I asked you to leave them out of this! Those innocent kits and they'll fit in fine with Riverclan! It'll only me that can be judged!".

The black she-cat shook her head, "You got yourself into this mess and you have to face the consequences. Those kits will be fine as rogues if you them raise properly, which I expect from my warriors. Mapleshade needs all the help she can get.". Mapleshade stopped struggling. With a flick of Darkstar's tail, the two cats separated, allowing Maplshade to get to her paws.

"It's decided, then.", Darkstar muttered. The leader turned to her clan, her words ringing loud and clear, "From this moment on, Appledusk is officially exiled from Riverclan! If you find him on our territory after Moonhigh today, treat him like any intruder.". She looked at her deputy, who now looked irritated by Darkstar's ignoring his willingness to forgive Appledusk. Mapleshade couldn't believe this was happening. Exiled twice in one day. What would they do? Where would they go? How would she feed three kits with no territory? Would they have to live as rogues for the rest of their lives? With questions swarming through her head, she barely noticed Darkstar listing warriors, "Spiketail, Rainfall, Splashfoot, Eeltail and Icefang! Escort Appledusk, Mapleshade and their kits to the southern border.". Darkstar meet Appledusk's gaze, "Make sure they leave.".

The five warriors started to advance on them quickly, fur blazing, claws unsheltered and eyes narrowed. Mapleshade jump to her kits, using her own body as a wall. No one would harm her kits! The Riverclan patrol cornered them, coming from all directions, forcing the family into a tight circle. "Mum-", Larchkit whimpered, "I'm scared.". Mapleshade leaned over, "They won't hurt you.", she mewed, "I won't let them.". Having rounded them up, the patrol like one living creature, moved forward, matching each other stride by stride. With nowhere to run, Mapleshade had little choose in shuffling forward, she scooped up the closed kit to her, Larchkit in her mouth. Then she kicked at Appledusk's side to grab his immediate yet needed attention, he glared at her but quickly picked up the message. Petalkit squealed as her father, a stranger to her, lifted her off the ground. She began flailing her legs, trying to escape. But a kit could do little to get away. Patchkit meanwhile, with a surprising amount of skill, leapt onto his mother's flank, getting a grip and scrambling onto her back. The group slowly edged towards the camp entrance...

Suddenly Reedshine came storming through the crowd, shoving her clanmates aside. "You can't let him leave!", she yelled, "I'm pregnant with his kits!". *What?* She could physically see a shiver run down Appledusk's spine, as he twitched almost fearfully. The frost of jealousy that had formed in Mapleshade, had now turned to solid ice of hatred. She and Appledusk were going to have a *long* conversation after this. The mood around Riverclan shifted however it wasn't enough for Darkstar to change her decision. The only reaction Reedshine got out of the leader was, "I'm sorry.". Three of her clanmates were forced to hold Reedshine back before she could reach the traitor. Mapleshade's could just make out the soft whisper of a young cat, "Appledusk...", a tom muttered. She noticed Appledusk's apprentice, Perchpaw looking on, helplessly as his mentor was taken away. The apprentice looked horrified.

The panic in Mapleshade grew inside her rapidly, as they were marched out of camp, into the reeds again. The long marshy and stony plains soon came into view, stretching out before her. Her eyes were solely fixed on the southern border in the far distance. She had failed. Now her kits would never be able to grow up in the four territories. They would have to live the harsh and honorless

lives of rouges from now on.

Chapter 3

Mapleshade still felt shaken up after being marched out of Riverclan camp in such ruff fashion. The young specked warrior that trod next to her, Icefang, left his gaze on the damp floor. Awkwardly avoiding eyes contact with the traitor or the angered queen. Unlike his inexperienced clanmate, Splashfoot burnt with a determination and sacrificed scent. Clearly glad to get rid of the traitorous Appledusk.

Finally, the patrol had begun to approach the southern border. It was marked with a distinct line of large perfectly arranged green hedges. The thin layer of vapour in air had gotten caught among the hedges' leaves, like a spider's web, causing it to drip with fresh water drops. The disappearing sun's orange warm light reflected off of the water's surface, giving the whole row of hedges a shining gleam. Her neck fur clumped together with bewilderment, as she recognized the horrors that lay just beyond that those bushes. They weren't natural, they were created by Twolegs. Meaning they were being forced into the Twoleg place and the realm of kittypets.

Mapleshade watched the blades of long grass be swept aside as she moved through them. She turned her head, to look at the four territories for the last time as a Clan cat. As soon as they crossed that border, they were in exile and will have to live as rouges. Beyond the rocky plains of Riverclan covered with running streams and rivers; was Thunderclan territory made from dense woodland with endless undergrowth, next was the towering dark pines of Shadowclan and finally the long stretching heather-covered moors of Windclan that touched the horizon. Her body tightens up with sorrow, the full weight of the situation just starting to sink in. She felt Patchkit violently shivering on her back. He must of been looking at the same view and feeling the same thing. Poor thing...

"This is it.", Spiketail's words rang in Mapleshade's ears. The patrol had stopped in front of the Riverclan scent line, just stopping short of a foul-smelling twoleg place, already able to hear the large

crashing sounds of monsters. Appledusk placed the curled up Petalkit gently at his paws as his deputy approved him. Spiketail showed clear signs of sympathy as he began to address the brown tom, "This is where we part ways. But before you go, know, I don't agree with Darkstar's decision. I know you meant well. And If I was the leader, I would have welcomed your kits into Riverclan.", the elderly cat took a slight pause for breath, "However she is still my leader and her word is the Warrior Code.".

Appledusk nodded, pleased with the deputy's kindful words, "I understand.". Spiketail's attention turned to Mapleshade, "Your kits have a strong heritage. Make sure you raise them well.". Mapleshade only responded with silence, unsure how to feel about it. Mapleshade noticed, Eeltail and Rainfall began muttering behind them, unimpressed. Spiketail seemed to take notice of it, too. "We've wasted enough time. Appledusk, you need to get going. Take your kits and leave Riverclan territory.", Spiketail instructed.

Appledusk opened his mouth but couldn't find the words, so just huffed, lifting the now dozing Petalkit off her paws. She was so tired, she didn't even bother to struggle as the cat, she distrusted, held her by the scruff. Mapleshade began to wonder if Larchkit and Patchkit were just as exhausted. As the pair of them turned their backs on the patrol, beginning to pad towards the border, several of cat started voicing their option behind them, "Good riddance!", Splashfoot rudely yowled. Mapleshade' ginger fur rose up like waves crashing against a stony shore. Oh, how she wanted to slash that cat's nose off.

Eletail joined in next, "Don't show your face here ever again!", proper hatred in her tune. Mapleshade struggled to ignore the comments as her blood boiled. She could even pick up her own anger scent. It was only what Spiketail mewed next, did Mapleshade managed to keep her emotions in check, "Good luck, both of you!". The young warrior, Icefang was about to speak but just in time, Spiketail's raised his tail to silence him. Any more comments were unnecessary. The patrol watched as the family wandered deeper into the unknown territories that lay beyond all the Clans. Satisfied, both groups went their separate ways.

It was only when they had made it safe distance over the border,

that Mapleshade made a sharp turn, avoiding what lay beyond the bright hedges at any cost. Appledusk seemed surprised at first, but reluctantly followed anyway without complaint, letting his mate take the lead. They travelled at a fast pace along the border, not stopping until a small birch woodland came into view. Now under the shelter of the birches, that Appledusk finally allowed his bitterness to rise to the surface.

Under the shade of the trees, his creamy sleek pelt was now given a storey hard grey tint. He placed Petalkit aside, laying her against the roots of a tree trunk, as he faced Mapleshade, "This all your fault we were caught, Mapleshade.", He growled. . Mapleshade unsheltered her claws, shredding the dried leaves at her paws. It was about time she dealt with him. Ignoring Appledusk for the moment, she placed Larchkit on the floor and nosed Petalkit her paws. The tiny she-kit blinked sleepily up at Mapleshade, curious, "What's going on?", she asked.

Mapleshade leads the three kits over to a nearby patch of brown ferns. Under them, the earth dipped slightly and was filled with dried leaves, creating a soft surface. It was the perfect kit-sized den. Using her head, she pushed side fern stems, creating a small path, "In here.", she pointed out, flicking her tail. They reluctantly did as they were told. Patchkit looked back, worried, "What are you going to do?". She crouched down, into the ferns, pressing her nose against Patchkit's, trying to calm him, "Don't worry about it. I just have you deal with your father quickly.". Larchkit trudged through the layer of leaves like snow, leaving a set of trucks, becoming restless. "We haven't played all day!", he protested.

Using her quick thinking, Mapleshade scooped up a paw-full of leaves, throwing them into the air and causing it to rain reds, oranges and yellows. Larchkit and Patchkit's eyes widen with delight as they began to leap around like overexcited rabbits, grabbing out for the falling leaves. "Here's a new game, 'catch the leaf'.", Mapleshade suggested. Larchkit looked at Petalkit sitting in the corner, staring at the floor, struggling not to fall asleep. He watched her deviously, his tail swishing from side to side playfully. "Leave her, Larchkit.", Mapleshade scolded, "She needs to rest.". Larchkit shrugged, "Fine.", lunging at Patchkit instead, taking him

by surprise. The two brothers squealed with excitement as they tussled in the leaves. Mapleshade couldn't help smile as she watched her kits. "Stay here until I come back.", she told them sternly, moving away from the patch of undergrowth. She padded towards Appledusk, who was sitting at the base of a tree, angrily mumbling to himself.

Mapleshade drew out her long claws to fall length. She would tear the sense into him if she had to. Appledusk's glare hardened as Mapleshade approached, "You ignored our agreement to stay away!", he growled, "But you just couldn't resist, could you? Dragging the kits to the dangerous Riverclan border and letting them show off how Half-clan they are. It allowed Ravenwing to spot you!"

Mapleshade's ear began uncontrollably twitching. She didn't want to listen to his cruel words for a heartbeat longer. Was this really the same cat she had fallen in love with? Mapleshade countered him, "I was a lone-mother doing her best to entertain her kits. It was meant to be a harmless little trip; How could I know our leaders would overreact? Where were you to help me raise them? Nowhere! So don't judge me!"

Appledusk shook his head defensively, "Kits ain't allowed to leave camp, Mapleshade. And anyway, You asked to raise them in Thunderclan! You know better then anyone, if I asked Oakstar to join, it would've ended in my murder and your exposure. What would've of that achieve?"

Makpleshade snapped back, "If we didn't need you for the first two moons, we needed when we were exiled! Yet what were you doing? Rambling about yourself the whole time, and not uttering a word in our defence!"

Appledusk still wouldn't give in, "I asked her multiple times to leave them alone! If I implied I cared more about my Forbidden family then my Clan, Darkstar would've of been harsher on all of us. Not that it mattered as it turned out."

Mapleshade shove her muzzle into his face, since he hadn't addressed one thing, "You may have done the bare minimum for

our kits, but what about me? Where were your words defending me? For all you knew, Darkstar might've of kept the kits but still exiled me!"

Appledusk flattened his ears, "Maybe I didn't want to defend you. Your impulsiveness endangered our kits so many times! Your unfair expectations they could've united two warring Clans as warriors - Recklessly giving Ravenwing the evidence to expose them - And today, making them to cross a flooding river! I want my kits to be raised by someone who won't get them killed."

Using all her willpower, Mapleshade made sure her mate's words couldn't go to his head. No, he's making up lies so he can make himself feel better! He's the selfish one, while I've done everything to protect my kits! Finally, she was able to ignore Appledusk's words and stand up to him, "You're making up excuses. I bet the real reason was because of your *precious* Reedshine.", Mapleshade mewed almost mockingly.

Appledusk swallowed down the anger, beginning to mutter, "It wasn't what you think.". Her rage snapped in that heartbeat. "She's having your second litter!", she pointed out, "What else could it be? How could you? After everything we've been through.". Appledusk got to his paws, preparing himself as the situation began to get tense.

"Hypocrite!", Appledusk snapped, "You were posing as Birchface's mate moons before I was ever with Reeedshine. Yet you never bothered asking me once about.", he voice become pathetically high-pitched with emotion, "Didn't you ever considered how I felt? Forced to watch my kits from afar, as they're being raised into wanting to kill me. Birchface is a pawn, just as much as Reedshine is. But all it's all necessary in keeping our kits safe."

Mapleshade refused to believe a single word that lying foxheart uttered. How dare you compare your dirty lies to my harmless secrets! Mine were the only ones with true good intentions! Mapleshade began to pace around him, "Oh, so now you're making it out like it's both our fault.", she mewed unconvinced. Appledusk step several paces back, his back up against the black and white bark of a birch tree trunk, uneasy. "It *was* both our faults.",

Appledusk insisted. Continuing to circle and pacing round the tom, she studied him carefully. . If he was manipulating her, it wasn't going work. Despite how much she hated to admit it, she needed him. Trying to raise three kits alone in the unexplored and unclaimed territories beyond the clans, would be near impossible. It would only be another moon until they would go off milk eventually and start demanding proper fresh-kill.

"That's not what sounded like back in Riverclan.", she finally spoke, "You called your own kits, a 'mistake'. I honestly don't know what I saw in you, to fall in love you. But I know now, You're disgusting!". That hit Appledusk right where it hurt most, his ego. His lip curled up as he growled at her, "I wasn't insulting the kits at all! I talking about our own actions being the mistake. I had pleaded to stay in Riverclan because I have too many responsibilities there. Many of my clanmates are replying on me-", he began. However Mapleshade interrupted him, noticing that he hadn't mentioned a specific thing even once, "What are their names?", she asked. Appledusk blinked at her in confusion. "What?", he buttered. He didn't even know!

"What are your kits' names?", she questioned. Appledusk tensed up, looking down at the floor as he hurriedly shifted through his memories. After time began to drag on, Appledusk finally had to give up and tell the truth. "I-I..I don't know...", he admitted. Mapleshade turned her back on him in disgust, walking away, "I knew it.", she muttered under her breath.

Surprisingly, he rushed after her eventually blocking her path. Mapleshade stared at him coldly. "Tell me.", he mewed. Mapleshade paused. Did he deserve it? "Petalkit, Patchkit and Larchkit.", she told him. It was up to him to find out which one was which. The former Riverclan warrior took a long and regretful sigh. "What am I going to do?", he mewed to himself, Mapleshade overhearing. "What else?", she began, Appledusk turning round, slightly surprised she heard him, "You're going to help me raise them. We're stuck together, whether you like it or not.". Which she didn't like much either.

"But I don't think I can-", Appledusk's voice trailed off. Her teeth were gritted together, she took a step towards him, fur spiked, "What? You can't what?", she challenged. No answer came from

him, however. He just trembled like a terrified kit. If he wasn't going answer, she would have to guess, "So what are you saying? Are you going abandoned your kits in the wilderness?", she asked. Appledusk looked sickened that he would be accused of something like that, "No, of course not!".

Mapleshade went nose to nose with him, dead serious. She looked him square in the eyes. Her tail twitched. "Good. Because abandoning them would be no better than killing them yourself. So if you even think about leaving me or my kits- I will kill you.", she uttered, her voice hollow. As she said that, she felt like she was in another cat's body. A much more bloodthirsty and savage cat. Could she live with herself if she ever went through with it? Having the blood of her mate and the father of her kits on her claws? Even the deepest depths of her mind, didn't know if it was an empty threat or not. Appledusk swallowed and slowly nodded.

"We'll sort out what need to do tomorrow, let's get just get some sleep.", she added, walking away.

Throughout their argument, Mapleshade had failed to see the world around them had darkened as night approached. Everywhere, the sky was now a smokey grey, with the first shining white star starting to peer through the soft twilight clouds. As she approved the fern patches her kits were staying in, she saw they were in a large heap, fast asleep. They had completely worn themselves out. Larchkit snored so loud, it could wake up a dormouse. She pushed aside the fern leaves and stems, trying to get into the packed space, careful to avoid any movements or sounds that could wake them up. Rapping her tail around them, she settled down on the soft surface of dried leaves. The fern smells took her back to the Thunderclan nursery. She curled up into a tight ball, pulling them in the warmth of her belly.

Then Patchkit's eyes slowly drew open. "Mummy, why were to yowling with the Riverclan cat?", he asked in a hushed asked. Mapleshade licked him between the ears, "It's grown-up stuff. You'll understand when you're older.", she whispered into his ear.

Patchkit carried on to ask her questions, "Is that brown tom really

our father?". Mapleshade paused. She couldn't hide it from them. "Yes, he is.", she mewed softly. The ginger and white kit looked thoughtful for a moment, "I don't believe what Larchkit and Petalkit said about Appledusk, I bet he'll turn out almost as kind as you.", he boosted with a spark of hope in his leaf green eyes. The Queen couldn't help but be taken back by the kit's innocence and idealist view of the whole situation. It must of been nice to see the world through the blindness of youth. "Let's hope he does.", Mapleshade mewed hopefully, "Now go to sleep now, we have a busy tomorrow.". Patchkit opened up his mouth, about to ask another question but Mapleshade stopped him by shaking her head. "Sleep now, questions later.", she told him, laying her head down on the nest of leaves. Patchkit nodded, finally settling down next to Larchkit and Petalkit in pile of fur, falling asleep within heartbeats.

Appledusk didn't venture into the fern den for a while longer. Mapleshade could hear the faint rustle of leaves, as he placed branches and brambles on top of the ferns. The extra layers of undergrowth did its job in blocking out bartering night wind and bone-chilling cold. It was only when the moon was high in the sky and it bathed the woodland in a silver light, that he quietly yet nervously, slip inside the tight space. He panted heavily and his pelt was mattered, after the late night of work. If she could risk waking up her kits, she would have made him sleep outside. He took his spot on the far side, the fern roots digging into him back.

There was a mouse-length's distance between the two 'mates', not touching each other. Mapleshade honestly didn't know what the future held for her or her family now. There were still two clans left; Windclan and Shadowclan. Maybe her kits could be raised in a clan after all. But they had to make it wasn't a repeat like last time. Lying seemed the only way out of a life of crow- food eating. But she could worry about that later. All she could hope, for now, was the empty void of sleep to overcome her senses.

Chapter 4

Her blurred senses began to separate from the black void of sleep and make sense of the world around her. The wall in front of her slowly become more detailed, seeing the separate lime stems, creating a forest of tall pale trunks. Mapleshade's neck ached from spending the night laying on a wooden floor, rather than proper bedding made from soft moss and feathers. She'll miss the nursery. Taking at the moment, she breathed in the fresh and crisp dawn air. Peering through the gaps in the ferns, she noticed a frosty white gleaming fog had drifted in, covering the small birch wood and Riverclan marshes in icy silver sheets.

She eventually noticed movement in the pile of soft fur at her belly. Petalkit shifted around uncountable serval until throwing herself away from her sleeping brothers, landing in heap on Mapleshade's tail, panting. "What's wrong?", she asked confused. The brown she-kit huffed, "It's boiling in there!", she complained. This just made Mapleshade even more confused. She had a thick pelt but overheating had never been a problem until now. Leaning over, she sniffed. Petalkit was right, it was near her belly and the source of it was...Patchkit. His chest rose and fell slowly, his breath heavy and swallow. He was horribly burning up like a blazing fiery monster ripping through trees and undergrowth as it charged through the forest. Lightly nudging Patchkit to wake up, he simply let out off a weak gruff moaning.

Instead, Larchkit began to steer from his deep slumber. "Is it dawn already?", the dark kit guessed, rolling onto his back and stretching his legs. Seemly he was completely ignorant of Patchkit's soaring temperature. Out of nowhere, Larchkit leapt to his paws, as if he had all the energy in Starclan, rushing outside of the ferns with the speed of a hare. "Don't go anywhere outside of my line of sight, ok?", Mapleshade called after him, feeling like anything that could go wrong, *would*, knowing her son. "Don't worry, I will!", not even bothering to look back at her as he sped off.

"Make sure he stays out of trouble.", she uttered to her daughter. Petalkit's face lit up. She flexed her claws, a malicious smile grew up her face like a weed, "It'll be my pleasure.", she mewed slyly. Before rushing out of the outstretching branches of the ferns, after her brother.

With her two other kits out the way, her full attention could be on Patchkit. He was fighting his own body; constantly uncontrollably shaking, raspy gasping for air, his eyes rolled inside his head making them white slit and he was as solid and cold as a frozen stone in leaf-bare. What was wrong with him? Mapleshade stood up, trying to give the young kit some space. She prodded him with her muzzle again, trying to get him to stand but he just continued to make meaningless unhealthy noises. Slowly she began to get worried, "Patchkit, Patchkit. Are you alright? Try and stand up.", she encouraged. Still nothing. He continued to lay there barely moving among the red and orange leaves. The only sign of life he gave off was the rising of the chest and occasional twitch.

Just then she spotted a cream pelt approving the ferns, ignoring the two kits charging after a moss ball. She'd honestly forgotten he was missing. As he came near, Mapleshade could see he was covered in a small layer of mud and he smelt of the marsh. The branches swayed as the large frame of Appledusk entered inside. Carrying three green limp bodies with him. Mapleshade blinked at him, "Frogs?". He placed them down at his paws, making strange movements with his mouth in an effort to get rid of the foul taste. "Well since we're in exile now.", mewing with a hint of mockery. Mapleshade narrowed her eyes. He quickly shifted his tone of voice, knowing he was pushing his luck, "-Since I can't fish in the waters of Riverclan territory, I have to make do with what we've got.".

He pushed a frog toward her, settling down with one of his own. Just looking at its lumpy slimy grey-green skin with those fish-like eyes made her want to be sick. "Where did you even get them?", she mewed, still wondering why he would choose frog over anything else. "A small pond near a twoleg fence. However, I think I drained what little prey it had to offer.". That was right, Appledusk, as a Riverclan cat, could only really hunt in water. And with Riverclan hogging all the nearby rivers and streams, he wouldn't be much use

in gathering food. So, unless they could find another water source with a steady food supply, she would have to teach him how to hunt on land. Which wouldn't be fun. She also wanted to get some travelling done today as well. They were too far over the border for any normal patrol to go after them. Sure. But if they sent too long lingering around the Riverclan's borders, Darkstar might send warriors to drive them further away.

Pushing aside her unappetizing meal for the moment, she turned to Appledusk, "You wouldn't know anything herbs or illnesses, would you?", being hopeful. The tom made a face after swallowing another painful mouthful of frog, "What do I look like? A Medicine cat?", he joked.

She sighed, moving around so he could see the limp Patchkit, "I think he's ill.". Appledusk's eyes surprising glazed over with concern, "He is?", leaning over and sniffing him over. He sat back, seemly unsure what to do, "What's wrong with him?", he asked. That's why I'm asking you! She couldn't help but cringe at her mouse-brained partner. She shrugged, "I don't know. He's not coughing, so I don't think it's white or Greencough.". Appledusk muttered something under his breath looking to the green wall for the heartbeat before looking back her. "So what do we do about it?", he urged.

Silence came over the two cats as they tried to think of a situation, only the squeals of the playing Petalkit and Larchkit from outside, could be heard. They need to get a Medicine cat to look at him but who? There were four medicine cat but which one? Both Ravenwing and the Riverclan medicine cat, Driftfur would probably refuse to help them after learning the truth.

Yet there was still Sloefur and Larkwing. Would they help? However, Mapleshade quickly decided against it. Windclan and Shadowclan were their last change on ever returning to the Clans. So she doubted they would let them join after forcing their medicines cat to cure her kits. Thinking it about, it couldn't be Driftfur either. Riverclan knew their location, so threatening one of their members could provoke an attack. They would have to relocate Petalkit and Larchkit and with not knowing how much time Patchkit had, it was too risky. There was only one left.

Mapleshade's fangs chattered with anticipation. She'd been craving to get rightful vengeance on the cats that had ruined her life. The blurry images of her Thunderclan trial came back, serval individuals clearer than others: Oakstar who exiled them, Ravenwing who exposed them and Frecklewish who harassed them. Then personally for Mapleshade herself, was Bloomheart, the mentor who disowned her. How they could throw outside innocent kits like crowfood sicken her. Foam began building up in her throat from the memory of the Foxhearts.

"What are you doing?!", came a shocked voice, breaking into her thoughts. Appledusk stood there, staring wide-eyed at Mapleshade's paws. She'd failed to release she tearing up the frog under her thorn-like claws. The head had been reduced to a green and red solid mush. "Just thinking.", she snorted, not bothering to come up with a believable excuse. Wanting to just get in out the way, she hooked the frog by the leg, shoving into her mouth. A foul watery-salty flavour filled her mouth along with the rubbery texture of the skin. She quickly forced it down her throat, not even chewing. Appledusk made a face, grossed out by his mate's actions. Moving on quickly, she changed the topic, "I know what we have to do.", she revealed.

"Which is?", Appledusk asked grumpily, not willing to play the waiting game.

"It'll be a half-moon tonight, correct?", she mewed. Appledusk nodded.

"Well-", she continued, "-Ravenwing will be making the journey to the Moonstone soon. That's our opportunity.".

The fish-smelling cat didn't clearly like where she was heading. "Where are you going with this?", suspicion tense in his tone.

"It may be our only chance.", she argued, "Now, it's simple. We take Patchkit and we ambush him at the base of Highstones tonight before he gets to Mothermouth, he'll be isolated and have nowhere to run. He can't fight both us. There, we'll force him to treat Patchkit, wound him if we need to.".

Appledusk staggered back several paces, in horror. Until he finally mumbled, "Are you really willing to do that?". She looked at him with hard stone eyes, "If it saves my son's life then yes.", she uttered. She sat down again, licking Patchkit between the ears. The kits only gave another weak response. From the back on the den, Appledusk's tail tip and ear twitched several more times. He looked on blankly in the distance, in the direction of Larchkit and Petalkit as they scrambled through the dried leaves, like a brown lake about to engulf them under it's muddy surface.

"Another thing.", She began again, "I want us to go somewhere safer. Being this close to the Riverclan border is dangerous.". Appledusk gave a quick glance over to river covered grasslands of Riverclan. A hint of sorrow came into his pale green eyes. She felt a stab of annoyance, the selfish tom still mourned the loss of his home. She bet he was staring at the view constantly behind her back. "But where do think we should go?", he asked, not conceived. She sighed, "I was hoping you might know somewhere.".

The cream cat bites as lips as he thought, "Well, there is one place.", he meowed, "A barn just beyond the twoleg place near the Thunderclan border. It's far away enough so no Clan cat would go there but close enough, so it's only a short journey the four territories if we ever need to return .". A barn? Mapleshade didn't like the idea of having to rely on twoleg structures for shelter, like some kind of kittypet. Well, it was temporary. She could complain about it later. After Patchkit was cured of the unknown illness.

"Fine.", she groaned as she began padding out of the ferns, wanting to talk to Larchkit and Petalkit. Appledusk hurried after her, "What do we do about Larchkit and Petalkit when we're going after Ravenwing? You can't expect kits they're age, not to get into some kind trouble.", Appledusk pointed out. He was right. Then it hit her, "I think I know someone that can help us.".

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Being a rogue now, meant she was forced to go the long way, sticking to the borders. She didn't like the idea leaving her kits under Appledusk's care; they definitely hadn't, but they were stuck

with each other, so some level of trust was needed if the family was going function and survive. All she hoped was that Patchkit's condition didn't worsen while she was away.

Putting all those thoughts to the side for the moment, she focused on her travelling. Earlier, she'd reluctantly rolled in fox dang, trying to avoid any unnecessary encounters. Even with her scent hidden with the odour of fox, she still made sure to always be at least tree-length away from the border and staying in the cover of undergrowth.

Finally, she began to approve the edge of the Thunderclan territory and her destination. It brought her mixed emotions coming back. It had been just over a day since she was exiled but this place already didn't feel like home, it just felt like a war zone. She was a constant threat of being attacked or even killed, so she couldn't afford to stay here any longer than she needed to. However, where she was heading, was a piece of territory that few ventured due to it to its poor hunting. But she wasn't here to catch prey, she was here for a very different reason.

The sharp songs of finches rang loud as she entered the forest. Mapleshade stumbled down a steep slope, the old oaks lay scattered around the area, their branches reaching out, bathing the woodland in a constant layer of shade. Long grasses and the occasional thornbush were the only undergrowth that grew here. With no berries or seeds for the mice to survive off of. After last night's short rainstorm, the grasses drip with fresh raindrops. Despite being technically over the border, the weak scent of Thunderclan, told her it had been a few days since a patrol had come through here.

She crept through the still wood as silent as vapour moving through blades of grass. The short trees soon began to spread out, making a small clearing with cracked soil. Two large pointed brown rocks, stood together side by side, at the left side of the clearing. The rocks' bases were covered in a dull moss, that showed signs of being scraped off by claws. But the oddest thing about this place, was the pile of flowers that lay at in centre, a wide range of types; Lavender, buttercups, daisies and many more.

Mapleshade crawled down in the tall damp grass the lined the edges

of the clearing, in wait. The place brought back haunting memories for her, even if it didn't mean much for the rest of Thunderclan, it had always meant a lot to her, ever since she was an apprentice. Those pointed stones were the things that had caused her father's head to split open. She shivered as she remembered the scene in every detail; As that savage white loner threw Dullface into the sharp stone while her younger self was dragged to safety by her mentor. She still remembered Bloomheart's vow that it never let it happen again. The fur running down her spine spiked as the yowls and shouts of that battle echoed in her ears.

She forced the dark memories down. She needed to focus. Tucking her paws under her belly, preparing for the possible long wait. The ground damp against her pelt. Cloud after cloud flew past her from above, being dragged on by the blazing winds of the sky. The sun slowly crept further and further away from the horizon, far beyond the stage of Sunrise. Despite time dragging on, making the dark tortoiseshell feel like she was trapped in limbo, she always reminded alert, ears pricked, eyes sharp and nose twitching. It wasn't until sunhigh, that finally, a mottled cream and lilac pelt wandering through the nearby scrubs like a hawk gliding around tree branches with ease.

The spiked leaves of a thorn bush rustled as a greying skinny she-cat stepped into the clearing, a small white lily gently gripped between her worn fangs. Mapleshade's heart beaten harder, It was her. The she-cat padded with a slow pace, struggling with age. Her heavy scarred neck and muzzle with matted fur showed long moons spent serving her clan, selflessly throwing herself into battle, doing anything to protect her clanmates.

The Elder placed the lily onto the small collection of flowers, bowing her head in sorrow. This was it, she had to it now, the she-cat would only be here for another few moments. But regret held her cowering in her grassy cover. If Mapleshade showed herself now, would the cat in front of her, forgive her? Had she brought the she-cat shame? Had she brought dishonour to Tulipfur's name? There was only one to find out, she drove herself from her hiding spot.

"Mother!", she called, standing and stepping out of the tall grasses,

entering the golden sanded clearing. Her mother's eyes shot open, looking and twisting around wildly until her sun yellow gaze laid upon her daughter. Silence reminded between the two cats for a heartbeat. Tulipfur took a step towards her, stunned, "M-Mapleshade?", she stuttered. Mapleshade smiled her greeting. Tulipfur rushed forward, pressed her muzzle against her Mapleshade's neck, purring loudly, "I'm so revealed you're not hurt.", she exclaimed. "Don't worry, I'm fine.", she told her mother.

Tulipfur drew back from Mapleshade, her eyes clouded over with sadness. Mapleshade felt as if landslide had hit her back from the overwhelming guilt. "I'm sorry, I didn't get to say goodbye to you.", the old she-cat muttered. It should be me saying sorry to you! Her mother carried on, "It all happened so quickly, I didn't even have time understand what was going on. But-.".

She trailed off with her words. Mapleshade was a little shocked, "You're not ashamed?", her thoughts slipping out into words by accident. Her mother shook her head, "What kind of mother would I be if I was ashamed of my own kin? No! Oakstar had no right in exiling Patchkit , Petalkit and Larchkit. All kits are a blessing, they can't control who their parent's ar-", she paused again. Mapleshade swallowed hard, knowing this was going to an emotional conversion. The lilac she-cat began again, "- Though I am a little disappointed you didn't come to me, Mapleshade. We could have softened sometime out and have avoided this entire situation.".

"I know, I know. I'm sorry.", She spoke while dipping her large ginger head.

Mapleshade was ready to explain everything if she needed to. Tulipfur meets her kit's glaze, "So what happened when you left? Frecklewish said how she saw you and your kits being marched off by a Riverclan patrol.", she mewed with a worried expression. Mapleshade felt a growl boil up inside her throat with the mention that name, Frecklewish. That name that Specked cat called her kits, 'Half-clan creatures' made her want to rip that foxheart's fur off. If she ever came across Frecklewish again, it would not a petty sight.

Mapleshade sighed as she began to explain, "I thought that maybe Riverclan could accept us but they rejected us and Darkstar ended

up exiling Appledusk as well.". Tulipfur spat on the nearby earth in disgust, with the mention of Appledusk. "All this is that stupid tom's fault. Honestly Mapleshade, what did you see in him? He's just a selfish snob.".

"Trust me, I know now. But I had to learn the hard way.", she admitted, slightly muttering. Tulipfur turned away from Mapleshade, beginning to scan the nearby undergrowth. She blinked, "What are you even doing back here? Where are your kits?", she asked, deeply concerned. Mapleshade sat down trying to make her body language less tense, trying to calm the situation however her mother reminded standing. Mapleshade explained, "They're fine. They're in a barn.", At least, she hoped they'd arrived at the Barn by now, "They're with...". Tulipfur interrupted her, "Appledusk?". Mapleshade nodded. The lilac cat began stressfully pace around the small sandy clearing, pieces of sand being kicked up in clouds as she walked. She began speaking as she moved, "Don't tell me you're letting him raise them! If I ever find him, I'll give a piece of my mind and put him in his place.", she growled, getting herself worked up.

Mapleshade laid her tail on her mother's back, flatting the fur, calming the scarred she-cat. She wanted to move from friendly conversion and get to business quickly. Her fox scent disguise wouldn't last much longer in this damp area, so she couldn't stay here long. "I come here to ask for your help. Patchkit sick, so I and Appledusk will be setting out tonight, to find a cat to treat him. So we'll need someone to look after Larchkit and Petalkit.", she told her mother, being hopeful. She wouldn't refuse the chance of seeing her exiled grandchildren again, would she? Tulipfur's eyes drifted to the sandy earth as she becomes thoughtful for a moment.

"Alright.", she mewed with a sudden spark of determination, "I'll do it, what do you want me to do?". Mapleshade felt a flood of a relief wash over her. She began to pan out the details, "Me and Appledusk will be leaving as soon as it gets dark. So could you try and make it to the Barn just beyond Thunderclan territory before sunset?", Mapleshade suggested.

Tulipfur's ear twitched uneasily, "Ok, I'll try, just make sure you do your part and get Patchkit better.". The mother and daughter shared

a smile between them. No matter what happens, the family should always be something you can trust. Mapleshade looked into the sky, the sun flying over their heads, sending a warm patch light directly onto them, as if they stood on top of a giant firefly. "It was getting late.", Mapleshade mentioned, "I should get going.".

Tulipfur lay her greying muzzle into her's cheek, "I'll see you soon.", she whispered. "You too.", the exiled rouge muttered in return. Slowly, she turned her back on Mapleshade, plodding away from clearing and into the nearby thicket. The green grass darkened as her mother's thin faint shadow sweep over them like grey water. Mapleshade stayed until her mother mottled cream shape faded into the gloom of the forest completely, then she padded towards away herself. However, she wasn't ready to leave, not yet. She had to do something first. Something that she should have done a long time ago.

Entering the shade of the almost bare branches again, she crept to a row of oaks, with a directive tangle of roots between each one. Like a medicine cat, she placed her nose against every root and plant, carefully smelling it until unsatisfied and moving on. It had been seasons since she last hid it. Then she spotted a familiar sight, a snapped grey branch, now nothing more than a stoney stump attached to a rotting hollow oak trunk. This was it. The roots around this ancient tree were so dense, it was like it's own network of dens, an endless amount of deep dark holes, waiting to be explored. Her nostalgia took over her as she approved it.

The holes between the roots were as large as cave entrances when she was a young apprentice, barely more than a kit. She remembered climbing in between the forest of dull wines, hunting down the giant killer-rabbits that stalked the deeper depths of the hollow tree. Mapleshade purred in amusement at her old fanatics. She was certainly was an imaginative young cat. Plunging her paw into the darkness of roots, she suddenly hit a hard smooth object.

Rolling it out, an old pebble covered with faded claw marks fell onto the sandy soil.

Her old favourite play-thing. Chasing moss balls had always been her favourite game as a kit. But she hated the fact they never last

more than a day. So finding this perfectly round pebble, made her overjoyed when she found it. She'd always liked to come here. Into this isolated part of Thunderclan, her own little corner of the forest. Acting like kit here, to escape the stresses of early apprenticeship; the first time away from the warmth of your mother's belly and going into terrors of battles for the first time. The world outside the camp had once been a scary place. It was her fault. Her father went looking for her and it cost him his life...

She shook the dark memories from her head again. Grabbing the pebble, she headed past the large tree trunks, returning to the clearing. Her head slowly become numb as her claws picked up the earth at the base of the pointed stones, carelessly throwing aside endless clouds of dust. She ignored it as it came up into her nose and eyes. Until she had a shallow dip in the ground, a half-hearted effect of making a pit. With a sigh, she dumped the rock into the shallow dip, landing with the *thumb*, bouncing slightly. She began burying the play-thing, that held so many good memories, keeping it under the earth, away from all eyes, along with that part of her life.

Patting the earth down, to hide the signs of the earth ever being upturned. Without any more hesitation, Mapleshade scripted across the wooden floor with the speed of a fox, heading towards the Thunderclan border.

Chapter 5

Mapleshade pressed herself against the two-leg fence, trying to contain any fear scent. Her ears pricked as she heard the heavy sound of running paw against gravel. "Are you sure you saw Mapleshade?", came Deerapple's voice, one of her former clanmates. The high-pitched bright voice of Nettlepaw replied, "I sure of it. I saw ginger and white tail.".

The sun crept forever closer to the horizon, sunset quickly approving. She was a young and healthy warrior, still in her prime, the journey to the Barn should have been quick. But Appledusk's vague directions to it hadn't proved useful at all. Now having to rely on her family's trail scent alone. At least she knew they had made it past the Thunderclan border without much trouble. Patrolling around the twoleg place had never been that good anyway. But despite that, here she was, being hunted down like helpless prey.

Deerdapple spoke again, "Does that mean the kits could be around here?". You wished. Mapleshade listened in carefully, holding her breath. A low rumble came from beyond the safety of fence, as a cat was growling to themselves, "Do you really think Oakstar did the right thing in exiling them? Frecklewish mentioned a flood almost drowned them the same night. That must be an omen of Starclan's disapproval.".

It felt like a mountain of boulders had collapsed on top of her. Out of every Thunderclan warrior, she could've encountered, it had to be *him*. Her traitorous mentor who supported her exile within a heartbeat. How could their moons of training together be so meaningless to him? Bloomheart was a father and mate himself, he should have understood! But of course he didn't, she thought cynically. She'd been too naive to admit it, but the moment she got

pregnant with half-clan kits, she had a hidden fear of her former mentor. Bloomheart was always amongst those foxhearted Clan purists.

Quiet rustling came from the other side of the wooden sheet, as Deerdapple teared up grass from under her paws. "Leave those poor kits alone, Bloomheart. They've already been exiled, there's nothing left to do.", Deerdapple huffed. Mapleshade imagined the two Thunderclan warriors circling each other, tails spiking as tension grew.

"I just being wary - They're free to do whatever they like beyond our borders. Oakstar told them to leave one time - How can we be sure that's enough? ", Bloomheart argued, "Those Half-Clan kits are being raised by Appledusk, the same cat who killed my daughter, Flowerpaw. How can be guarantee our kits safety with those revengeful rogues around?"

Despite how much Mapleshade wanted to spring out and shout at Bloomheart, she used the squabbling to slip away. Mapleshade looked around at the small garden that surrounded her. Mouse-dang! She'd trapped herself. The whole patch of bright grass was closed-in by fences or red walls. The only way out was the way she came in, scaling the fence. She dug her claws deep into the bark, bending her back legs, preparing to make the leap. She licked her lips nervously, she had make this quick.

"Enough!", came Deerdapple's voice once more, "Oakstar only wants the kits in exile but nothing else. If you lay a claw on them, you will be reported.", the she-cat sternly warned. Mapleshade laid a single paw onto the fence, each heartbeat dragging on painfully slowly. From the other side of the fence the quarrel continued with Bloomheart rudely snorting, "You do that. I don't care. Let's just back to findi-". Mapleshade saw their shocked faces as she came into view ontop of the fence. The whole thing shook under her weight.

Instinctively, Nettlepaw scaled the fence to be at Mapleshade's level, his voice shaky, "What are you doing her-". Before he could finish, Mapleshade raked her claws hard across his jaw, sending him tumbling through the air. He landed awkwardly on his ground,

groaning with pain. Even if he was an apprentice, he wouldn't stand in the way of the Queen and her kits. While Deerdappled rushed to Nettlepaw's side, while Bloomheart focused on Mapleshade, "That's my son, you foxheart!".

Twisting her whole body round, she sprinted down the fence ledge at full pelt. A hate-filled yowl came from Bloomheart as Mapleshade made it further away. While Bloomheart had the strength of a banger, Mapleshade had the climbing of a squirrel. Using her bushy tail to balance herself as she ran across the fence. It was as easy as running across a thick tree branch. The trees of Thunderclan quickly become long wielding fields of Twolegs farms as she neared the border. Ignoring, several dumbfounded kittypets watching her, as they lazed around in their gardens. Just a bit further. Then from the corner of her amber eye, came a fast moving pale grey shape, darting along side her from the bottom of the fence. A tom with a thick tabby markings and strong build. *Bloomheart.* His face was strewed up with raw determination as he recklessly charged after her. His breathing heavily as he struggled to keep up.

Using his own body as a log, the long-legged tom slammed into the fence with his flank. The whole fence violently trembled, making her lose her footing. She grabbed the sides with her claws as her back legs and tail dangled over the edge. Bloomheart sprang up, his teeth digging into her back leg. She cried out in pain. Both cats were spent tumbling down, hissing and spitting, right into a thick patch of stings nettles. She flailed out as she felt sharp pain all over her body as the nettles stung her from all directions. She was surrounded by sharp needle-like leaves, like nature itself was against her. Roots and stems tangled around her as she desperately tried to climb out. Completely ignoring the pain; Bloomheart tore through the nettle bush, relentlessly driving himself forward, his eyes blazing as he picked his way over to Mapleshade. She swiped the leaves out of her face, giving her room to breathe. Gathering the energy, she the gripped the earth, heaving herself forward. She gasped as she broke out from the nettle bush, rolling into the open air. Still covered in nettles that clung to her shredded fur.

However this worked to Bloomheart's advantage. She'd caused the branches of the bush to split like a torn ear, giving him a perfect

way out. He quickly broke free and leapt high into the air, landing on top of Mapleshade. "I know you too well Mapleshade - I thought exile wouldn't be enough and here you are, attacking an apprentice! My son no less. ", Bloomheart spat as he clawed as her pelt. The ginger queen raised her paws to her face, protecting her most vulnerable areas.

Flipping her onto her back, Bloomheart pressed his claws into her neck, "I'm not letting you hurt anyone else so this is how it's going to work: Every time I catch your family trespassing, you'll leave with a permeant injury. So if you continue coming, sooner or later, you'll have too many injuries to survive. So this warning better sink in quickly."

Refusing to listen further, Mapleshade kicked out at full force. With Bloomheart knock over, she attacked a second time, blindly slashing out. Then she heard a sharp hiss of distress as her back paw meet flesh and bone. Twisting her head round, she saw Bloomheart flailing on the grass-covered ground, clawing at his own eyes. Three long claw marks ran across his muzzle, right up to his left eye. Mapleshade stared at him. The wounded eye was badly swallowed like rolling dark green hills at night. It oozed with streams of thick blood. "I-I-I...", the tom scattered, panic overwhelming him, "I can't- I can't see! I can't see out of my left eye!", he yelled out in terror.

Calming himself down with steady inhales, Bloomheart plunged his paw into a nearby dock patch, snapping a leaf off its stem. He pressed it against his bleeding eye in a vain attempt to save it. Even if Bloomheart had better herb knowledge than most warriors, it was pointless. Though Mapleshade couldn't stay to watch him try, as Nettlepaw and Deerdapple were catching up.

Hurrying to her paws, she began dashing towards the Twoleg farms again, leaving the shivering cat behind her. "Coward! Get back here and answer for what you've done.", Bloomheart shouted. Glancing back, Mapleshade noticed he'd pressed a dock leaf into his bleeding eye. Even if he had better herb knowledge then most warriors, she doubted

As Mapleshade ran, she felt a wave of anger move through her. If

she didn't have a family to look out for, she'd be more then happy to prove him wrong. One day, she'd show that fox-heart that she was no coward.

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She placed her nose to the rough gravel path again. This was where Appledusk's trail scent ended. Her ears pricked as she looked up the tall red two-leg nest. This must be it. This must the Barn.

It was as tall as a pine. The walls were made from strange smooth flat bark, like nothing you would find in a forest. She padded to the side of the Barn, trying to find a way inside. How did they get in? "Appledusk?", she called out to the Riverclan tom. Several moments passed, until eventually she spotted a cream head poke out from a well-hidden hole, next to a pile of logs. "I'm here!", he responded, running over to greet her. His eyes narrowing as he approved, "It's almost sunset, what happened with you?", he asked. Seeing that Mapleshade's fur was matted and covered in stinging nettles. "Nothing.", she lied, not wanting to make a situation out of it, "Just got stuck in a nettle bush on my way here.".

"Minnowbrain.", Appledusk muttered. Just before she could cuff him over the ear, she stiffened up as he began to pluck out the leaves from her fur. She quickly knocked him away with a kick, leaves still in his mouth, "I'm can do it myself. I'm not a kit.", she insisted. Appledusk spat the nettles out, all getting caught in a gentle breeze, scattering them. "Suit yourself.", he mewed. They both walked towards the entrance to the den, Mapleshade taking the lead as they neared. She ducked inside, eager to see her kits again.

Inside, all over the place, the same thing, mountains of dried yellow grass. Faint tapping sounds as tiny feet scurried across the bark floor, in the dark depths of the Barn. This place was plateful of prey. "Larchkit, Petalkit, I'm back!", she yelled out, knowing Patchkit was too sick to respond. Her voice echoing in the cave like space.

"We're here!", came her mother's voice, causing Mapleshade's eyes

widen. Since when did Tulipfur get here? She rushed over, tracing the sound back to the left far corner of the Barn. She found Tulipfur laying out on the golden straw, Patchkit settled in her front of paws and Larchkit and Petalkit bouncing up and down on her flank. As Mapleshade came into their view, Larchkit and Petalkit immediately ran over. "Mother's back!", Petalkit yelled out in excitement. They torched noses as they reunited. Larchkit stepped back, puffing, "Why did you have to leave us with Appledusk? We don't like him!", the kit complained.

"He's your father, Larchkit. I'm sorry but you're just going to have to get use to him.", trying to explain to her son. Mapleshade's whiskers could sense Appledusk lingering in the far side of the Barn, hearing everything they were saying. He was keeping his distance as Tulipfur kept an eye on him. Clearly, she'd kept her word and had a talk with the cat that had broken her daughter's heart.

Mapleshade sat down, letting Larchkit and Petalkit to finally feed. She glanced down worriedly at Patchkit. He didn't seem any worse at least, still lying stiffly, breathing heavy. She turned her head up towards her mother, "It's good to see you but- How did you get here so quickly?", confused how her elderly mother beat her to the Barn. "Well it was easy; I went back to camp, said I needed sometime to clear my head after what happened you, no one questioned it and went straight here.", Tulipfur briefly explained, speeding through the story. "I could ask you, 'why were you so slow'?", Mapleshade's mother carried on, "But looking at the state of your pelt, it's obvious.".

Mapleshade grumbled. Did everyone have to point out her messy coat? After Petalkit and Larchkit finished, she settled down beside the cream and grey elder. "How is he?", she asked. Tulipfur shrugged while shaking her head, "It's mixed. One heartbeat he'll be boiling, the next, frozen solid. He's not getting any worse but you need to get him treated as soon as possible.".

Mapleshade began tearing at the golden grass under her paws, "I see.", she mewed. She rose to her paws again, "We might as well get going now then".

She called out to Larchkit and Petalkit, who were throwing up heaps of hay, trying to grab each individual strade. As the brother and sister came over, she began to give them clear intrusions, "Me and Appledusk are going to get Patchkit treated. So while we're gone, be sure to be nice to Tulipfur.".

Petalkit lowered her head in sadness, "You're going already?". She nodded. The brown kit jumped into her mother face, "Why? You just got here!", she complained.

Mapleshade licked Petalkit's check, trying to calm her down, "I know, I know. Things have been quite hectic these past few days, so I've had a lot to soft out. But everything will settle down again soon, I promise.". Petalkit just stayed wordless.

"Now, don't go outside, do as you're told and go to sleep on time, we'll be back before sunrise.", she mewed. Larchkit's ears flatten, annoyed at all the new rules being set. Mapleshade turned Tulipfur for the last time, "Thank you for doing this.", truthful gratefulness in her mew. Her mother just nodded, "Don't worry about us. Just focus on getting my Grandson cured.".

Mapleshade leaned down, gently taking Patchkit by the scruff, heaving him off his paws. He was limp and floppy, making him heavier than usual. "See you!", Larchkit called out as his mother walked away. She'd just hoped they'd make it back before sunrise, which was a big ask, as Highstones was a long way away. She found the dozing tom leaning on a small heap of yellow strew as bright as the sun. He snapped out of his sleepy state with Mapleshade approach. "We're going already?", Appledusk questioned, confused. Mapleshade nodded, not in the mood for conversion. They had a lot of traveling to do. Her mate reluctantly followed her across the Barn. "Are you sure we should be leaving so early? Shouldn't we rest a bit? What about food? You hadn't eaten anything since dawn.", he pointed out.

Her voice was muffled, talking while still carrying Patchkit, "Don't worry about me.", she ordered, "Worry about Patchkit. The sooner we catch up with Ravenwing, the sooner he'll be cured.".

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Dusk had now settled over the landscape, purple and light blue clouds swirling above. The tall pointed rocks being bepthed in the fading light, being given a black tint. Her legs ached and hunger clawed at her stomach but she pressed on. Adrenaline pumping through her veins. This was an encounter she'd been waiting for. Appledusk trailed on behind her, heavy panting. Thunderclan territory was now nothing but a few rows of trees in the far distance. Patchkit tightened up into a ball, struggling against the harsh winds that blow against the rocky plains of the Highstones.

The group scrambled up a steep cliff side, shreds of grey stone trickling down with every slip. The earth here was darker, muddier and rougher than the ground in Thunderclan. The bare rocky surface of Highstones was dotted with patches of scrawny heather. For land blessed by Starclan, it was surprisingly barren. Only the toughest of plants could live here.

Mapleshade leapt another crack in the smooth boulders they were climbing over. The highest point they could reach, giving a clear view of the whole area. They landed with a jolt, making Patchkit groan. She heard a loud thud as Appledusk land clumsily next to her. A Riverclan cat up here was as good as a Windclan cat in water. She peered over the edge, the land rolling down into a sloop before going into a valley, the cliff walls touching the sky on both sides. She placed down Patchkit for the moment, trying to get her bearings. She'd been an apprentice since she last came here. Trying to track down a small black tom in this vast, quickly darkening landscape was almost impossible. Like trying to find a single star among the endless waves of glowing orbs in Starclan. Any scent left by Ravenwing would of been swept away by the raging fierce winds. Appledusk watched in silence as she gathered her thoughts. Trying to track him down would be a waste of time.

All they needed to do, was wait in place where they knew Ravenwing would have to pass through. Mothermouth was the obvious one but all the medicine cat would pass through there. The chances of getting spotted by an unwanted cat was too high. Yet again, she knew he would have to pass through Windclan territory to get here.

Mapleshade turned to the Windclan border, tail swishing. She

stared hard at the large open pale green fields of Windclan, covered with heather and shifting grasses. "Let's head down towards the Windclan border.", she told Appledusk, picking up Patchkit again and leaping down from rock to rock. He groaned for a bit before hurrying after her. She edged across a long stretching fallen stone like a branch, leading towards another ledge. Appledusk decided another root, using nearby boulders like the stepping stone back in Riverclan, jumping across them with little effort. As they entered the bottom of the valley, the ground began to sprouted thorn bushes and small ancient, almost rotting, alder trees. Small glances of movements could be seen, as rabbits hopped among crevasses of the valley.

The sight of prey made her mouth water but she forced down the urge to hunt. No. Patchkit came first.

Mapleshade lead Appledusk to a flat stone ledge, covered with wiry heathered that twisted and grew around itself. The small platform gave them a good view of the grey slope that lined with a wide Thunderpath, with loud shining Monsters speeding under them. Laying down next to the heather and pressing Patchkit against her belly. She tried her best to warm him against the chilling night air. Appledusk reminded alert, standing tall on the flat stone as he took up the role of lookout. She closed her eyes, "Soon.", she muttered into Patchkit's ear. To her surprise, Patchkit stirred, opening his eyes to slits, clearly struggling. He gave his mother a smile, "I'm fine...", he mewed quietly. Appledusk's ears pricked, "Is he talking?", he exclaimed excitedly. "Get back to looking for Ravenwing!", she snapped. He obeyed, sniffing at the air. She curled protectively around her son.

By the time she'd opened her eyes again, the whole sky was a mockery dark blue. The horizon was skimmed with silverlight, as the tip of the moon edged into view. A sudden unnerved scent came over Appledusk, as he strung from his sitting position. "I see him!", he growled, "He's just crossed the Thunderpath.". At those words, Mapleshade immediately scrambled to her paws, heart pounding. "Let's go.", she spoke sharply, grabbing Patchkit and dashing down the jagged brown rocks. Sure enough, she could make out a solid black object moving up the northern part of the cliffside. Nothing

but a thin shadow in these vast mountains. Thudnerclan scent lingered on the rippling breeze. That mouse-heart was going to pay for everything he'd done!

They advanced on him, like helpless prey. She leapt and scripted through the jagged rock field like one of the rabbits that lived here, not letting anything get in her way.

Getting closer, she could see the Medicine cat in more detail. His strolled up the slope side at a steady pace, his expression calm and muscles relaxed. The mouse-brained fool was still completely ignorant to the cats silently stroking him in the night. It wasn't until Appledusk came within several fox-lengths of the Ravenwing, did his shady blue eyes finally meet her flaring amber eyes. Ravenwing staggered back several paces, his tail bushing up in fear, "M-Mapleshade- Appledusk?", he staggered.

Appledusk sprang forward as Ravenwing tried making a ran for it. Using his weight, he slammed Ravenwing onto the hard stone ground, the air being forced from the black tom's lungs. Mapleshade placed down Patchkit onto a piece of dried heather. She felt something strange and new as she circled the pinned Ravenwing. He began begging, "Look, whatever you're planning on doing with me, it's not worth it. It'll just put your family in dan-". He immediately stopped as Mapleshade placed her long claws against his throat. "Now, listen carefully if you don't want your throat sliced opened.", she threatened. Ravenwing gulped and Appledusk's ear twitched.

Just then Appledusk raised his tail for silence, before opening his mouth to taste the air. His eyes peered down the sloping grey land. Mapleshade followed his line of sight and she spotted it. The faint outline of two cats dashing across the Thunderpath. The blazing eyes of a Monster speeding past them, illuminated the two cats; a young black and white she-cat and grey tom with splashes of black - The Riverclan medicine cats, Echopaw and Driftfur.

Mapleshade hissed to herself in irritation. Of course, Riverclan needed to cross Windclan territory to get to Highstones as well. The cover of darkness could only do so much, they could easily spotted out in the open if the Riverclan cats came any closer. "We can't stay

here.", Mapleshade mewed quickly, picking up Patchkit again. Appledusk grabbed Ravenwing by his neck fur, forcing him to his paws. Then the cream tom knocked Ravenwing several paces with his flank, getting him to move. The two cats rounded up their prisoner, heading to a more sheltered area.

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They lead him to an isolated rock hollow, surrounded on all sides by jagged peaks. Where no other cat could spot them. Dim weeds and moss grew among the cracks that climbed the walls and floor. The only way in and out, was the small gap between two large round boulders. Now it was only him and them, trapped with nowhere to hide.

Ravenwing padded into the center of the hollow, the fur running against his spine bristling. His pale underbelly tightening up in fear. Appledusk side-stepped, so his back was against the hole, blocking off any possible escape routes. Mapleshade's lips drew back to show gleaming thorn-like teeth, snarling. Ravenwing lowered to the floor, whimpering. "What do you want from me?", the tom uttered in quite yet tense voice. Mapleshade shifted round her body, using her tail to point out Patchkit leaning up against her front paws, "Something's wrong with Patchkit and you're going to fit it.", she instructed simply. "What?", Ravenwing asked, eyes widening.

"Check him!", Appledusk snapped angrily from the back of the hollow. The medicine cat slowly and nervously edged forward, his blue eyes constantly flickering up at Mapleshade, as if she going to bite his head off. Which she meant if he pushed it. Hesitantly, she allowed Ravenwing to get near her kit, his small pink nose poking through Patchkit's hot sticky fur. Ravenwing sat up, thoughtful.

"Well-", Mapleshade quickly getting impatient, "What's wrong with him?".

Ravenwing sadly shock his head, "It's not like any illness I've came across before. Has Patchkit experienced any extreme temperature changes recently?". Mapleshade's heart sank. It must of been when he fell into the freezing river. This was her fault! "Yes.", having to force herself to admit, "When he fell into the river, he was under

there was good amount of time.".

Ravenwing looked up into night sky, grey clouds only letting the brightest of stars shine through. He mouthed several random herb names to himself, trying to figure out what to do. "I can try and use Feverfew to bring his temperature down.", he suggested, clearly doubtful of his own words.

"Where do you find it?!", Mapleshade demanded, standing up. Ravenwing jumped back in shock, "There's a stream running into Windclan territory.", he explained, "there might be some there but I'll have- to...", trailing off his words, not wanting to say it. Mapleshade narrowed her eyes. She didn't want to let him leave but if it was necessary to treat Patchkit, then so be it.

"Fine.", she puffed, turning to Appledusk, "Go with him. And if he tries anything, scar him. I'll stay and look after Patchkit.".

Appledusk agreed, moving aside so the entrance to the hollow was clear. "Come on.", he spoke harshly. Ravenwing did as he was told, padded over to the entrance, still slightly lowered to the ground. "Be quick!", she added as Ravenwing crouched down and slipped into the gloom of the short tunnel. As soon as Ravenwing's and Appledusk's tail tips disappeared round the corner, Mapleshade tacked her paws under, trying to get comfortable on the bare rock. Covering Patchkit with her tail. The moon had now raised high into the sky, giving the landscape a silver outline. Her tortoiseshell pelt almost glowing in the silverlight. Without Appledusk and Ravenwing there, an uneasy silence and stillness had came over the hollow. As if the world was holding its breath.

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Then a swirling breeze disturbing the bushes that lined the top of the hollow. Making whispering like noises as if the valley itself was trying to talk, calling out to her. She began to wander how long it would be, until the Moonstone was hit by the moon's beam of light, bringing it to life as it glimmered with endless reflections of bright stars. Had all the other Medicine cats gathered in carven yet? Would they go looking for Ravenwing?

Then, as if it was destined to happen, her concerns were answered. Her ears pricked, as she heard the muffled voices of a passing conversion, coming from somewhere above her. Riverclan scent hang in the air. However it wasn't Appledusk's. Mapleshade rose to her paws, pressing herself and Patchkit against the far stone wall, continuing to listen carefully. The voices slowly become clearer as they neared, words beginning to string together like a spider's web. She could even picked up the scraping of rock as they walked over it. A she-cat was talking, a young one, "-He's definitely in the area. Let's just search a bit longer, please.". It must of been Echopaw, Riverclan's medicine cat apprentice. Mapleshade only faintly recognized the young apprentice's voice from gatherings. A gruff voice sounded as an elderly tom began scolding Echopaw, "We're wasting time! The Moonstone will light up soon.".

Echopaw and Driftfur. Did they spot her and Appledusk leading Ravenwing away? They couldn't have. They'd been all the way back at the Thunderpath. The overpowering acidy scent of the Thunderpath, would have blocked out any Thunderclan or Riverclan scent that had the chance of drifting down there. But that didn't matter anyway. They were dangerously close to finding her hiding spot.

The conversion casually continued, "But we can't let another Medicine cat miss the sharing of tongues with Starclan.", Echopaw complained. Mapleshade could pick up Driftfur's growing frustration with his apprentice, "It's Ravenwing's responsibility to get to the Moonstone on time, not ours. We shouldn't butt in with Thunderclan business anyway.". Yes, turn around and leave me and my family alone.

"Hey wait- Can I look in this one spot and if he's not there, we'll go.", Echopaw asked, awfully close. Panic began to surge through Mapleshade. She wasn't talking about the hollow entrance was she? "Fine quickly, but if you don't find anything, we are going.", Driftfur snorted. Why was he agreeing to this? She left Patchkit against the wall and leapt towards the entrance. She crouched down next to the tunnel and waiting. Her tailing began uncontrollably lashing, feeling ridiculously threatened by an apprentice of all cats. A grey nose was twitching in the murky gloom of tunnel as a cat moved

through it. Suddenly a black and white head poked out, looking round the clearing.

Not giving Echopaw time to react, Mapleshade grabbed the apprentice's head with a single paw, slamming it onto the floor. "Hel-", Echopaw started but Mapleshade increased the pressure, driving her head into the ground even harder, sealing her jaw shut. Only being able to make quiet groaning noises. Mapleshade leaned forward, hissing into the she-cat's ear, making her warning loud and clear, "You saw nothing. Repeat it. You saw nothing.". She allowed the apprentice's jaw to loosen, her breathing was rapid as fear gripped her. But the apprentice kept a steady head, "I saw nothing...", she muttered, baring her fangs.

Mapleshade nodded, "That's right, you will tell no cat about this. Not even Driftfur. Now get out of here.", she spat, annoyed that Echopaw had the nerve to bare her teeth at her. Slowly, she unsheltered her claws from Echopaw's fur, letting her go. She began shuffling back, her fur pressed against the two boulders. Echopaw kept eye contact with the growling rouge as she disappeared into the blackness.

Mapleshade sighed with relief, sagging down into the floor. Patchkit was awake, having watched the whole scene, confused. Driftfur's words came from the other side of the high rocks, "Well, find anything?", he mewed, an edge of mockery in his voice. Echopaw staggered, "Ur- Nope, nothing. You were right.", she lied. Mapleshade grinned to herself. The apprentice was wise for her age. Wise enough to know that her threats weren't a bluff. "Told you, now let's get going.", Driftfur spoke. Their pawsteps soon fading away into the night. Her and Patchkit were safe.

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It wouldn't be a while longer, until Ravenwing and Appledusk finally returned. The black tom seemed less on edge, then he was when he left. What Mapleshade didn't like. Ravenwing held a bunch of small white flowers between his teeth. Hopefully that would be the herb that would sort out this mess. He laid the Feverfew on the ground, pushing it towards her with his paw.

"Here.", he meowed calmly, "Get Patchkit to eat this. In one go if you can.".

Gently, she shook Patchkit, trying to get him to sit up. Grudgingly, he managed to pull himself up on shaky legs. Mapleshade showed him the small white flowers, "See these? These are going to make you better, all you need to do is swallow them.".

Patchkit stared down at the herb blankly for a long time until eventually nodding. She held the herb up to his mouth as he nibbled at the edge of the petals. "No, Patchkit.", she explained, "You need to try and eat it whole. Without chewing.". The kit groaned, leaning over again and taking the whole plant into his teeth. He was hesitant to swallow. "Come on.", she encouraged, "Just do it and get it over with.". With another pause, Patchkit tipped his head up, trying to force the herb down. However he quickly began choking, bringing it back up again. "Maybe you should let me try.", Ravenwing suggested, moving towards them. "No!", Mapleshade growled, making him keep his distance with a warning slash, "I'll do this.".

She placed her paw against his chin, making his head point upwards, allowing the herb to finally be swallowed. Patchkit collapsed to the floor, coughing. A worried father watched from the back, "Is he ok?".

Ravenwing shrugged at Appledusk, "Don't worry, most kits find it hard to take tough herbs like Feverfew.".

The herb began to worked quickly, Patchkit was now able to stand without her support and his breathing turned from raspy and hot to more steady and even. Mapleshade stepped away, giving her son some space, "How do you feel now?". Patchkit coughed a few more times, "Better at least.", he smiled, his voice still a little weak. Thank Starclan. She looked up to the stars gleaming down at them, imagining the shining warriors of Starclan looking down upon them. Not choosing Patchkit to be among their ranks tonight, allowing mercy for once.

"All this wasn't necessary, you know.", Ravenwing muttered behind.

Her shot round to stare at him, tail lashing. "Do go on.", she challenged while growling. She expected him to back off but instead he held his head up proudly, preparing to speak his mind. Why wasn't he scared of her? Her stomach curled around itself, as she grew irritated. A full argument broke out between the two cats;

"If you'd just told me that Patchkit was sick, I would of happily gotten the Feverfew.", he pointed out, "Threatening me wasn't necessary.". Mapleshade felt outraged. What nonsense! "Oh please!", she shouted, "There was no way you would of helped Patchkit willingly.". The fur on the back of her neck spiked up like the jagged rocks of Highstones. Patchkit ducked under a nearby thorn bush, peeking out as his mother raged on. While Appledusk whispered annoyed words under his breath, Mapleshade couldn't catch.

"All the kits in Thunderclan are like kin to me, of course I would of helped him.", Ravenwing countered, "Despite what you think, I do care about him.". The black tom still managed to show no signs of aggression, while Mapleshade scrapped her claws against the grey surface under her paws. "If you really cared-", she muttered, "you wouldn't of gonna us exiled.".

"That wasn't my decision and you know it! As Medicine cat, it's my duty to tell my leader the truth. I didn't expect Oakstar to go as far as kick out innocent kits.", he argued.

"It still is your fault!", her throat being worn down by all the shouting, "Because of you, my kits will live as rogues, because of you, my kits won't ever have a future.".

Suddenly Ravenwing snapped, going into a full out rant, "Stop trying to put to the blame on other cats! When you know, it's your own fault! I wasn't the one who betrayed their clan and took another a mate from the enemy. I wasn't the one of lied to their own clanmates, used a dead cat's name for your own selfish gain and broke the hearts of Frecklewish and Oakstar. I don't agree with Oakstar exiling your kits, but I certainly agree with him in exiling yo-".

Mapleshade howled in rage, leaping forward, taking Ravenwing off his paws. She tore at his neck with her fangs, spending black shreds of fur everywhere. Ravenwing thrashed under her paws, yelling out in pain. "Mapleshade stop!", came her mate's voice, but the words were blocked out by the icy solid wall that now covered her mind, quickly fading away as if nothing had been said in the first place. Weakly, Ravenwing tried kicking out at her underbelly with his hide legs as a last effort, but his claws failed to draw blood. She felt numb in that moment. Like she wasn't in control anymore, her body just moved and she just said things, without wanting to.

Mapleshade spat in his face, showing her disgust for him. "Pathetic really.", she hissed, leaning over to meet his eyes clouding in terror, "Only 2 moons alone and you're already leaving Medicine cat role behind. I hope Oatspeckle is watching right now and seeing the truth about you, that you never deserved to call yourself a Medicine cat!". She didn't know why she was bothering to say anymore to him. He was a about to die and it was more than this pitiful lump of fur deserved.

The Medicine Cat spluttered and choked, writhing around on the floor as his neck oozed with streams of red. She just watched him for a heartbeat. Like a helpless rabbit about to become fresh-kill. Until finally ending his suffering with a clean slash to the throat. Her claws run with blood, as Ravenwing let out one final gasp before going limp, dead.

Appledusk just stared at that lifeless body of Ravenwing, speechless. Mapleshade stepped over the blood stained Ravenwing, padding over to the bush Patchkit was hiding in. He'd seen the whole thing. Patchkit was surrounded by spiky branches of the thorn bush, facing away from her. The kit was completely traumatized, crunched on the floor, shelving and whimpering. He violently flinched and uttering, "No.", as his mother grasped him by the back of the neck, raising off his paws, into the air. Turning around, she saw Appledusk standing over the body, fur on end and ears flattened. "Why did you have to do that?", his face disappearing into blackness as a large cloud passed over the moon, blocking out it's silverlight.

Mapleshade ignored him, heading over to the hollow entrance with

Patchkit. Appledusk didn't stop, "Ravenwing did what we asked! He cured Patchkit. How could you kill a Medicine cat? Are you sick in the head?". She halted. Looking round to face the tom, "Don't pretend like you've never killed before. We're Clan Cats, it's just a harsh part of our lives.".

Appledusk flicked his tail over the body, slowly shaking his head, "Not like this.", he muttered, "Clan cats do it with honour, in battles, to defend our clanmates and territories. But this- this is just in cold blood, for pity revenge. This isn't what warriors do, it's what rogues do.", he hissed, his white fangs gleaming as the starlight reflected off of it. "That's cute.", Mapleshade mocked, heading back.

Chapter 6

The long journey back to the Barn was travelled in dead hanging silence. Patchkit shivered in fear. While Appledusk stared at the floor, his eyes blaring with a green flame. Exhaustion and hunger were starting to overwhelm her, as she struggled to keep steady on her paws. Luckily, the large looming red shape of the Barn in the thick fog of the dark night. The shift in the air; from crisp and chilled to fresh and warm, told her that dawn slowly approached.

By the time they entered inside the gloomy towering insides of the Barn, Tulipfur immediately came over to the greet them. Mapleshade stood there unfocused and lifeless. Her head and tail drooping. "Oh, you poor thing.", Tulipfur whispered. Her mother took hold the dazing kit from Mapleshade and flicked her tail towards a large bundle of hay.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of Patchkit, you just get some sleep.", she took a hard look at Appledusk, "Both of you, I guess.", she mewed reluctantly. Tulipfur softly placed Patchkit in a pile among his sister and brother. She didn't have to energy to argue or even say 'Thank you'. All she could do was pad over to the edge of a golden lining and fall into it in a giant heap. The straw was itchy, digging into her skin slightly. Feeling Appledusk lay next to her, fur pressing against her. His breath hot on her face. She couldn't even be bothered to push his away. Consciousness slipped away like trying holding clear water in your paws. Murky darkness forming over her sight. Within heartbeats, she gave in to deep yet restless sleep.

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As she began came round, she found herself lying on a stiff back, her belly exposed and hollow of food. Glowing orange light surrounded her. Her nose twitched as she tried to make sense of the world around her, like a newborn kit opening their eyes for the first time. A scent was urging her to get up, something familiar. Not wasting time, she heaved herself up, feeling heavy, sluggish and dazed. She allowed her nose to guild her as her eyes still adjusted. The feeling of homecoming over her. She blinked. A small chestnut-brown plump mouse lay at her paws. Fresh too.

Smiling, she knelt down gratefully, starting to chew at slowly. The juicy taste of the meat filling her tongue. Mapleshade purred. Much better than Appledusk's frog. Then she spotted Tulipfur padded past her, more mice dangling from her jaw, "Enjoying it?", she asked. Mapleshade swallowed another mouthful, "Yes, thank you.". Tulipfur placed more mice at Mapleshade's side, "And you'll be getting more where that came from", she confirmed.

"I knew you still had the hunting instinct in you.", Mapleshade commented. Tulipfur nodded proudly, "And it will be for a long time to came. It takes a lot to bring down this old she-cat!". The two shared a purr of laughter.

Mapleshade grabbed the half-eaten mouse in her mouth, about to pad over to her kits but the lilac cat dashed forward, stopping her. "Don't worry.", like she always said. Her mother insisting her, "You'd been through a lot, so just relax. I'll keep your kits in line.". Mapleshade shrugged, maybe it would be nice to have sometime to herself. Tulipfur turned and walked away, "It might be the last time I see them anyway.", she mewed sadly. Mapleshade's head hang lower.

Then she noticed the itchy texture in her fur. She twisted to see her back, it was covered in Appledusk's cream moulted hair in her ginger and black pelt. Gross. Then came his loud snoring as behind her as he slept. And there went the good mood...

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The rest of the day was sent in a dreamlike daze. Tulipfur agreeing to stay until Sunhigh at least. They sent the next several hours

relaxing on the endless layers hey as the Larchkit and Petalkit played. Patchkit is the corner, staring blankly at the wall. Mapleshade licked her lips with stratification, her belly bloated with the mouse. But Appledusk just grumpily complained that it wasn't fish. The walls of the barricaded any glimpse of sky, all sense of time lost.

Soon came the time for Tulipfur to leave. It came too soon. They touched noses and she was gone, just like that.

Mapleshade returned to the stake of hay at the front of the room, Patchkit and Appledsuk still glaring at her. Despite the blood being washed off a long time ago. She yawned. Moving away, to the far end of the Barn, into old of the damp shadow-fill corners. Sitting down, she closed her eyes in thought. This didn't feel right. Having this much prey with this little effort. Having no duties to do. Living in this type of isolation from the outside world. In this strange limbo, devoid of time. Getting the taste of damp, rotting wood, gave her a sudden desire to return; to a lush forest with low trees, with fresh rainwater trickling from the branches, the sky covered by a green canopy but the sun always managing to shine through. She gritted her teeth. She wouldn't let her or her kits become kittypets.

"I'm going for some fresh air.", Mapleshade muttered as she passed Appledusk, not bothering to see his reaction. She slipped under the thick Barn wall, her belly scraping against the sharp sand. As she made it outside, she sucked up the frosty Leaf-fall air, filling her lungs. A pale sun flew up in the cloudless sky like some kind of elderly fireflies, losing its glow. Mapleshade continued to sit there peacefully as a mild breeze steer the shaded farmlands around her, causing tall grasses and bushes to sway.

Her ears then pricked as her nose began to uncontrollably twitch like mouse's. There was a piney soft of scent lingering. Thunderclan? Her heart sank to her paws. *Thunderclan!*

In the far distance, outlines of different pelted cats moved across a dim field, straight towards the Barn at a steady speed, their features too blurred to name individuals. The large patrol was made up of half a dozen warriors at least. Panic began to surge through her; How they know they were here? They were already exiled, why

were they still after them? This wasn't about Ravenwing was it? They couldn't of known about it so soon, could they?

Slamming the questions to the side of her head, Mapleshade took action. Springing to her paws, she stumbled to get under the swallow dip in the earth, trying desperately to get into the Barn, like a flailing rabbit trying to cowardly retreating into a barrow. Her legs flailed as she tried to get to grip on the ground. As soon as her claws hit the ground, she violently flung herself into the Barn, with a cloud of sand and grass. Larchkit and Petalkit stopped play fighting. Appledusk was immediately on his paws, rushing over. "What's going on?", he demanded. Mapleshade met his lime green gaze, breathing heavily with panic, "Thunderclan- Thunderclan! An entire patrol.", gasping for air slightly. Petalkit stepped forward, "Mommy, what's going on?", worry draining off her like sun-heated rain, turning to steam and rising into the air. "Petalkit, Larchkit and Parchkit! Stand there and don't move!", she mewed with a harsh tone, swiping her tail to a bare patch of stone on the floor, not covered with hay. The kits did as they were told, sitting on the stone in a tight bundle, shaking.

Appledusk froze for a heartbeat, before leaning forward, about to poke his head out, but Mapleshade grabbed him by the tail, yanking him away. He fell onto his side, making a strange grunt as he landed. "Don't give away our position!", she spat in his face.

"Like you didn't do that when you were getting your 'fresh air'.", he argued back. Mapleshade cuffed him over the ear, "Shut up.", she ordered. They might in be life or death situation, the last thing they needed was pretty bickering among themselves. She hurriedly looked around the Barn, trying to get her thoughts together. What should they do? It would suicide to try and stay and fight. Yet again if they tried and ran, would they be fast enough? With one of them having to carry two kits? Was there even time and an opening for i- The scent of Thunderclan was distinct now. It was a hounding noise as a forest of paws struck against a gravel path and muffled anxious voices. The patrol was only a few tree-lengths away.

Mapleshade went for broke, going for the only thing she could think

of in that split heartbeat. Scooping up a massive leap of hey, then slammed it down onto the entrance. Before jabbing it with her front paw, packing into the dip, making it denser. But it created nothing but a thin layer of grass, no thicker than a leaf, even light managing to get through. Appledusk just stood with a stupid flabbergasted look on his face. "Fill in the entrance with as much hay as possible, quickly!", she insisted. "That's our only way out!", he pointed out.

"And their only way in!", she remarked.

Appledusk bit back the irritation of being wrong, sped to the closet pile of towering golden grass. Mapleshade gripped a few grass blades between her claws, dragging them across the floor and shoving them into the thin barrier. Appledusk returned with a pathetically small mouthful of dried grass. As he dropped it onto the floor, Mapleshade's heartbeat rang in her ears with frustration, "Get more, a lot more!", she snapped, kicking him in the chest, so he stumbled towards the yellow mountains. This wasn't enough. They would notice the movement of shadows from inside the Barn at any moment. And at this point, one good shove would be enough for the entire thing to collapse. They needed more and fast.

Luckily, Appledusk came back again, this time with a heap of hay as big as a log. That was more like it. Appledsuk shoved it into Mapleshade's paws, dashing back. She got back to work as well, using her experience building den walls, she weaved it between the other blades, like a spider's web. Tightly packing it in until it was as solid as a rock and as tangled as a nettle bush.

Suddenly, Mapleshade stopped, ears pricked. She held up her tail for Appledusk to halt. Just beyond the barrier, came the same voices, much closer this time. A growl formed as Oakstar spoke, dangerously close, "I thought you said the scent trail ended here?", sounding impatient. She gained a sudden urge to tear open the barrier and rip his face off. The one that had put her into this mess in the first place. Then came another tom's voice, Seedpelt, "It does, I swear, just give me a bit of time.". Puffing noise came from just a few mouse-lengths away, as a twitching noise smelted the air. Though the cracks in the yellow wall, Mapleshade could just make out a white and brown head, Seedpelt looking directly at her. They blinked, holding their breath. Than Seedpelt twisted on the spot,

yowling off his head like a sparrow. "Here, Oakstar! They're over here!", he shouted.

Without Mapleshade needing to tell him to, Appledusk ran. Damping the hey and scripting over to get more. She grabbed, forcibly jamming it, desperately trying to block the Thunderclan cats getting in. Shadows danced beyond the entrance, as more cats gathered round, with hurried voices, Mapleshade too frantic to make sense of. Another hey pile came. She slammed it in. Her front paws beginning to tire. She began panting. No, it wasn't enough. "Mapleshade!", Oakstar rang, "We know you're there! If you have any honour left, came out and face us.", he voice booming, shaking the air itself. Mapleshade didn't bother responding, she just kept on piling on every scrap of hay she could in reach.

Despite, his mother's earlier orders, Larchkit left his brother's and sister's side and went over to his mother, "Let us help!". Mapleshade froze. Then she started hearing scraping noises of claws against diet, "Dig through.", Oakstar ordered. Every little bit helped. "Fine.", she mewed quickly, "Copy what's Appledusk doing!". Before turning away from the dark brown kit, starting to kick at the hey barrier with her back leg, trying to make more solid. The kits got to work, grabbing small mouthfuls of hay from round the Barn and taking it over. With the extra hay, progress was faster, making the barrier larger and larger. The shape of a warrior made her flinch. They'd already dug halfway through the barrier. This was serious.

Not caring anymore, she reaches through the grass, outstretching it until she felt the warrior's head. She caught a glimpse of Seedpelt, giving her half-hearted growl as a retort. Her leg ached as it was stretched too far but she dug her claws into Seedpelt's head anyway. He staggered back a few paces to avoid the pain. Luckily, only one cat could hit in the entrance at the time. They had that advantage at least. She doubted the laid back Seedpelt even cared about this whole situation.

Slowly, the family lost their basic system. Instead of beginning to simply; to wildly charged back and through, damp as much as hay onto the growing pile and occasionally ramming into to make it more compact. Many attempts were made by the patrol to breach the Barrier but all failed. Both sides were now tiring. With Oakstar

getting angrier and angrier. With his frustrated yowls and hisses filling the air, after every failure. The barrier was so paced, it was the size and strength of an anthill now. Until eventually he decided to switch up tactics. Just as Mapleshade collapsed to the floor in exhaustion, Oakstar began to try to yell through the dried grass wall, his voice ridiculously muffled, "If you cooperate with us now. We'll only partially blind you and Appledusk.". Her kit's eyes widen in horror as they waited from afar.

She and Appledusk stared worried glances. Mapleshade tried getting up on shaky paws but failed, ending up crawling up to towards the wall and pressing her head against it, "So is exiling my entire family and ruining our lives, not enough for you?", she hissed through the wall. The wooden wall shifted very slightly as Oakstar leaned up against the same wall, his enraged scent draining from him. It was like venom to her nose. "We know what you did, Mapleshade! Darkstar told us. You killed Ravenwing and his death won't go unaveraged.". Darkstar? How could the Riverclan leader possibly know about Ravenwing? Then it struck her. *Echopaw*. She knew she should deal with that pest of an apprentice more efficiently. Wishing she'd given Echopaw a good scatch or two, to drill in the message.

"And one of my warriors is half-blind because of you as well.", he added, his anger starting to get the better of him as he started to scrap at the wall with his claws. *He deserved it.* Mapleshade secretly responded. Mapleshade quickly ran through the things she could say to the questions she could ask. She knew she had limited time before he lost his impatience for good. "How did you even track us down?", she asked.

"You're mother, Tulipfur. Took us a while but she eventually confessed.", Oakstar ruffled slyly. Mapleshade felt like her all legs had turned to twigs, she could barely stand. Being choked by an invisible cat. She finally snapped out of the confused daze, "What have you done to Tulipfur?!", she demanded. "We haven't hurt her, If that you're thinking.", Oakstar insured, "But it's your fault that she'll be spending the rest of her life confined to the Elder's den." , he snapped like an enraged banger, a hint of guilt in his voice for a

heartbeat. Mapleshade's heart became stone and hollow. She wouldn't be able to visit her father's grave anymore. The flowers couldn't be left to rot, it was a mockery of Dullface's name.

"You'll never touch me, Oakstar. No matter what you do!", she muttered, turning her back to the wall and padding away. Tulipfur would want her to be stronger. And she wasn't going to disappoint. He wasn't worth anymore. None of those low-lives was. If they either wanted to forget about her or to kill her. Fine, she didn't care. She was too good for them. She stared at them; Larchkit, Patchkit, Petalkit and Appledusk. Those were the only cats that mattered now. No one was going to get in their way. No was going to get close to them and get away with it. They'd be better than any Clan cat.

Oakstar's howl out a cry of uttered rage, as loud and as piercing as a Owl's screech ringing throughout a dark forest.

He then began addressing his warriors, "We're wasted enough time here. Let's get back to camp". It was the songs of Starclan in Mapleshade's ears, letting off a massive sigh of relief.

But then that crumbled when Oakstar muttered his next orders, "Seedpelt, Trushtalon, you two stay here. You're on guard duty, they'll have to come out eventually.". Then was shifting of gravel and loose stones as Oakstar twisted round, "Don't think this is over, Mapleshade!", he called, "Ravenwing won't go, unaveraged.". The shuffling of paws, that slowly faded away as the patrol set off, walking further and further away.

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And so it went on like this several hours, dragging on and on. The kits finding it harder and harder to entertain themselves at the back of the Barn. The shift in the air was the only sign that night was beginning to set in. They'd been in this confined Two-leg nest for an entire day. Mapleshade dropped on top of the barrier, feeling like a hollow trunk, struggling not to let sleep overcome here. Appledusk loomed over to her like a bad smell, "Are they still there?", he asked for the third time to in a row. She tasted the air, the tangy smell of Thunderclan meeting her nose. "Yes.", she muttered, annoyed. How

much longer, she began to wonder. If they were trying to starve them to death, it wouldn't work, they had a steady supply of mice to last them moons.

She was even starting to hate the Barn air; this stuffy, heavy, thick, humid air. It was horrible to breathe.

Appledusk eyes narrowed, beginning to scrap at the first few layers of the hay pile they'd created. "What are you doing?", she snapped, wondering why in the name of Starclan he was tearing down the only thing keeping them safe. His gaze gleamed with a bright and determined spark, "Let me check out there at least once. Oakstar only said 'Seedpelt and Trushtalon' to guard. That'll be two on two. We could take them.", he suggested. If he'd said this earlier, she would've called him 'mousebrained' but by this point, she was getting desperate.

However, that didn't stop her doubting his words, "How? An entire Thunderclan patrol couldn't break through here. What are you, a Windclan tunneler?". Appledusk shrugged, having more confidence then he should, "I won't be having to dig through extra layers added every heartbeat. Trust me, I swim underwater every day, how much different can hay be?". Before she could stop him, he padded on the centre of the barrier. Drawing his claws to full length, he began pulling heaps of golden grass, throwing aside in the massive clouds. It began raining down with yellow grass blades.

In no time, Appledusk had managed to make a shallow tunnel, chucking more hay behind him like a rabbit. Mapleshade lay crouched at the tunnel entrance, tail swaying. "If they're still there, come straight back.", she warned. If they were, she'd know how to deal with them. The creamy shape of Appledusk slowly become smaller and smaller as made it through the large barrier, the cycling of the tunnel managing to hold. Appledusk came to a halt, before then jabbing the hay with a front paw, hard. The wall in front of him collapsed, letting a beam of moonlight shine through. It made her smile for a quick moment to see the outside again. Cautiously, Appledusk crept out into the night's chip's air, looking around. He then stepped to the side, out of view for a moment. Abruptly, there was a mass of sharp sounds, hissing, and yowling.

Appledusk leapt back into view, locked in combat with Seedpelt. The two cats rolled over each other, with Seedpelt trying to bite down into her mate's neck. Mapleshade's fur spiked and tail lashed. Luckily, Appledusk managed to get a grip on the warrior's underbelly, flinging him off with his back legs. As soon as he was free, he instantly dived into the tunnel, flailing slightly in panic. But Thrushpelt and Seedpelt were hot in pursuit.

With Thrushpelt only a rabbit-length's away from Appledusk's boney tail. As soon as Appledusk reached the Barn, he threw himself out, rolling. With Appledusk out the way, she immediately leapt into the air, slamming down onto the hay pile with all her weight. The tunnel quickly gave way under the pressure. Like a cave-in, clumps of golden grass began falling onto the two Thunderclan cats. Their cries of terror being cut off as they were buried alive. The cats around the Barn barely moved for a few good heartbeats.

Then a terrified kit's voice came from being behind her, "How could you kill more cats?!", Patchkit whaled out. Mapleshade calmly turned to her son, "It's hay, Patchkit. It won't kill them.", she explained. Patchkit fell silent. A growl of anger formed in Mapleshade's throat, they're were in an even worse position now. The Hay pile could only keep them trapped for so long, when they finally managed to dig their way out.

Then they would be trapped inside with the two Thunderclan warriors, with nowhere to go and three kits to defend.

Then there was a large crashing sound coming the far counter of the Barn. A strange black and white tom with a brown collar looked around the barn, confused. "Tulipfur? Are you alrig-", he called out but he was cut off when he noticed the strangers standing in front of him. "Who are you?", Appledusk growled. An enraged Mapleshade dashed straight for kittypet before he could reply to Appledusk. She rammed into him, tackling him to the ground and placing her paws on his chest and neck. Pinning him down. "How do you know Tulipfur? How did you get in here, kittypet?!", she demanded.

However Petalkit grabbed onto her tail, "Mum, stop! Myler on our

side. Tulipfur allowed him to play with us while you were out with Patchkit!", she explained while shouting. Mapleshade held back a growl, hating the idea of her kits being allowed to mix with a kittypet. She was resistant at first but she eventually she stood aside, "Get up.", she instructed the kittypet. Myler quickly shuffled to his paws, bowing his head politely. At least he knew to respect Clan born cats. "Sorry for coming uninvited like that. I heard the hissing and I thought something had happened.".

Mapleshade was about to speak, but before she could, Appledusk barged past, going nose to nose with Myler, "Wait. If you got in- You can get us out.", he mewed excitedly. Then it hit Mapleshade, then she stepped forward, "How did you get in?", she demanded.

The kittypet staggered back a few paces, in surprise but soon shrugged and flicked his tail towards the left top corner of the Barn. It took a lot of squinting and heartbeats, but eventually, Mapleshade managed to spot the tiny slit in the bark wall, serval fox-lengths off the ground. It was next to one those darker brown lines in the wall, that stuck out slightly to make a narrow ledge. "Sure.", Mapleshade snorted, "We'll just head up there as soon as we sprout wings.".

Larchkit jumped excitedly in front of her, his tail hooked at the end with determination, "Oh no, Mum. You don't need wings. Myler showed us how to do, come on!", before she could stop him, the over adventurous kit began scaling up the largest mountain of hay in the entire Barn. He looked like a chestnut-coloured cricket bouncing wildly among the golden grass. She twisted to face Myler, what had he'd be teaching her kits? But a pale brown tail lay on her chest, blocking her. Appledusk slowly shook his head. Mapleshade just scoffed, storming off. One by one the family started to follow Larchkit up the mountain of hay. The Queen leaned over, but before she could grab Patchkit, he jerked. "No!", the tom squeaked like a mouse, "I'm not letting you carry me, I can do it myself.".

The male kit then stomped off in a puff, after the rest of the group. Mapleshade followed on behind, speechless.

When she'd reached the top of the grass mountain, she warily tests the platform's surface, scraping her twisting claws against it.

Seemed like to be made of some kind of wood. She struggled to find words to describe it, it was either a very thick square branch or twolegs had somehow leant to makes logs float in midair. Either way, they were everywhere attached to the roof of the Barn, crisscrossing.

A groaning noise was the only thing that took her away from her confused state. Like the fish he hunted, Appledusk flopped up the haystack, tripping as he went. Wanting to just get out of this Barn, she grabbed him by the scruff, struggling under his massive weight, flinging him over the ledge. She neatly leapt on over him, as moaned to himself and continued on creeping the bark ledge. For cats their size, it was easy for them with the kits already at the end, waiting with Myler at the small slit. A dim moonlight beam, reflected off the damp surface of the bark, turning into a pale grey. Taking the lead, moving past everyone else, Mapleshade stuck her head out into the fresh night air, taking in the moment of freedom from suffocating atmosphere of the Barn. If was as if she'd surfaced after being trapped under the murky surface of a river. Then one look down, she saw the steer drop below her.

"Can we jump down there?", Larchkit asked from behind her, his ears twitching. "No.", she immediately responded, grabbing the kit before he could do anything stupid. Larchkit just let out a squeal of irritation. This jump would hard enough for adult cats let alone kits. With one last sigh, she bent her legs and launched herself down. The windswept past her face, causing her face fur to flatter like a desperate pigeon trying to avoid the snapping jaws of a fox. Suddenly her paws meet the ground; the air was forced from her lungs, her legs snapped like twigs as she fell over and the blood rang in her ear tips. Larchkit has knocked away from her grip, sending him scribbling across the dirt floor. They were finally outside. Groaning slightly, Mapleshade rose to her paws, looking over to Larchkit, shaking the specks of earth from his dark pelt. "I could have jumped myself, you know.", he boasted. He was fine.

Appledusk and Myler followed, falling like pebbles. Her mate tripped like her, making Patchkit fly off. While Myler, with clear experience, neatly landed on all fours, only giving off a slight grunt of pain. As soon as Mapleshade made eye contact with the

unwelcome ally, Myler knew to drop Petalkit away from him. Straightening himself up a bit, the Riverclan tom turned to the kittypet, curiosity making his nose twitch like a rabbit's, "How do you even find that tiny hole in the roof?", he questioned.

"This Barn was kind of mine before- well before you lot took resistance there.", he joked, bursting out into a fit of purring laughter at his own joke. A blazing fire crept down into Mapleshade' tongue.

"Enough!", she snapped, Myler's laughter trailed off to an awkward silence. She turned to Appledusk, "More Thunderclan cats could show up at any heartbeat, we need to go now.".

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They were nothing but fasting moving black outlines against the cloudy night sky, devoid of all stars. Mapleshade and Appledusk sped across the flat dull farmland field, their kits holding on tightly as they ran with the speed of foxes. They needed to get as far away as possible. They ran and ran, not stopping until the Barn was nothing but a small red bot against this massive landscape of grasslands and strong standing twoleg nests. Gradually, coming to a complete halt at the border of one of the endless farms. She left Petalkit on the upturned muddy soil, trying to catch to her breathe.

Instead of scent marks, the Twoleg seemed to mark their borders with fences instead but this was a type she'd never seen before; It was serval fox-lengths high with weird silver vines that coiled around each other like a web, supports by smooth shiny black sticks, with scrawny dried weeds the only plants able to grow there. They couldn't be climbed like the usual fences made of bark, they would need to find a crack or hole to get through. Giving in to the exhausted she leaned up against a stumpy tree.

Appledusk soon joined at the tree, letting Patchkit and Larchkit to ground. He tried to mew while his breath was heavy with panting, "Shouldn't we go further?". Mapleshade glanced over to the Barn in the far distance, nothing but a red speck. Thunderclan territory was

almost non-existence in her line of sight, a very thin green line of the horizon. She closed her eyes, "It's going to take a while for Trushtalon and Seedpelt to get out of the hay and get back to camp.", she pointed out.".

Appledusk rolled his eyes, still thinking he's right, "You can never be too safe you know.".

Mapleshade wasn't done though, "We can't get much travelling done tomorrow if we exhaust ourselves beforehand.", she tried to then ensure the paranoid cat, "We're fine for tonight. We'll get travelling done tomorrow." . He just sighed, before nodding.

Pleased to have Appledusk's complaining out the way, she padded over to her kits, they blinked as they looked around the strange new environment. Skimming over the nearby undergrowth, she looked for a place to sleep. Petalkit muttered into her mother's ear, "When can we see Myler again?", she asked. "Hopefully never.", she sneered, carrying on with her search for shelter. "Mapleshade, don't say that to a kit!", Appledusk exclaimed.

Trying to ignore the annoying comments coming at her at every direction, she slipped away nearer to the Undergrowth next to the fence. However, all the undergrowth was too low and tangled to climb into to sleep in. She growled to herself.

Just then familiar scent insanity put her on edge, including Appledusk. A nearby Thunderclan scent. Her kits quickly pick up on their parents' aggression, banding together and watching intensely. Suddenly came a darting grey fur at her left, rushing straight towards her kits! Before she could fully react and stop him, Bloomheart launched at the three kits. Why had he come here? Was this the same cat she once knew? Grabbing the nearest kit to him, Petalkit was forced into snappy wild jaws, she screamed out with a mix of terror and pain. Bloomheart trashed the helpless kit violently, like a massive two-leg with a piece of prey.

As she stumbled to save her daughter, she felt like she had the whole strength of Starclan on her side. Like a badger, she pounded Bloomheart into submission with her front paws. A blood-soaked Petalkit was thrown to the floor, with deep teeth marks on the back

of her neck. Appledusk moved into to help Mapleshade, but she spat at him while struggling to keep Bloomheart from recovering, "Protect the kits, you mousebrain, not me!".

Under her paws, Bloomheart gathered his strength and dug his back legs into her underbelly. "You've destroyed my future!", he yowled into her face. She could only gasp as she was flipped onto her back. Already grabbing his chance, Bloomheart hurried to his paws. Before he could do anything more, Mapleshade grabbed his lashing tail with needle teeth, yanking him towards her. Leaving traces of blood. The savage staggered against the flurry of front blows against his muzzle.

In that heartbeat, she noticed the three fresh scars creeping up his face, ending with a blind eye. That wouldn't be the only scars he'd be getting tonight, if they weren't enough to kill him. How dare her mentor attack her! In her fit of rage, she becomes unfocused and clumsily, leading to sloppy attacks. The siamese tom quickly managed to duck under the next paw swipe, leaping at the opening.

Both were sent to the floor, hissing. They were now in a storm of endless teeth and claws as neither of them refused to break. The amount of hate that blazed in his eyes and edged his voice was ridiculous. She began to question if this was even a Clan cat she was fighting. The well-being of her kits took her away from the battle slightly, as Bloomheart clawed to get through her paws covering her face. Luckily, Appledusk stood over them, tail lashing. He was struggling to not to leap into the fight. Only there when she needed him.

Knowing they were safe, allowed Mapleshade to focus on tearing Bloomheart to scraps. Breaking away from his slashing range, rearing up onto her hind legs, about to bring down her paw to batter his head. However, Bloomheart swept his leg under her, causing her to crash to the ground. He moved quickly, pressing his foot into her exposed stomach and dig his claws deep into her throat. She choked as he went deeper and deeper until his claws were up against her windpipe. She stopped resisting. Bloomheart leaned down and spat into her face, his rotting breathes in her nostrils, "You've always been like this, Mapleshade - Never thinking of the consequences. Because of Ravenwing's murder and my injury,

Oakstar shoved me into the Medicine den. Because of you, my family can't a second litter. Nettlepaw will grow up without siblings!.

What nonsense was he spouting now? How could any cat possibly predict that? Mapleshade fought through the pain of the claws inside her flesh and growled back at him, "Don't blame me for your stupid eye! You attacked me first - A Queen!".

On Bloomheart's face, a crooked scowl grew like a weed, "You were never a respected Queen in the first place. Your crimes brought an evil cat's spawn into this world.", drawing in his claws deeper now.

Appledusk bared his long white fangs in an enraged snarl, "Get off her and leave my family alone, foxheart!", he demanded. As Bloomheart attention turned to the other tom, she felt the pressure on her neck soften slightly. "And don't think I've forgotten about you, *murderer*.", he whispered dangerously, "Don't talk to me about families when you took Flowerpaw away from me."

Appledusk staggered back but steadily gained his composure. "I swear on my life, I'd never kill an apprentice on purpose. It was an accident. But how can you justify dragging an innocent kit into this? You're just branded yourself with the title of murderer as well.". He whipped his tail towards the battered kit, partly breathing under the layers of dried blood and shredded fur.

At Appledusk's accusation, Bloomheart recoiled with disgusted, "Those creatures ain't kits! They're a prophesied evil, who will become murderers like their parents. If have to take Ravenwing's place in Starclan's plan, I'll do it as a warrior, not a medicine cat!"

While Bloomheart was distracted rambling, Mapleshade grabbed her slim chance. Chomping down on Bloomheart's leg, made him jerk away in shock. Keeping up the assault, she drove him off his paws by landing heavily on his back. She then placed her fangs around his neck. He lashed out with flailing paws but none worked to knock her away. All she had to do was tighten her grip on his neck and he would dea- "Mum, don't!", cried out Patchkit.

All turned to the tiny ginger and white kit with black speckles, "You

can't kill another cat, it's bad. Tell her, Dad. Tell her it's bad.", turning to Appledusk for back up. The tom seemed to be taken back slightly, being called 'Dad' the first time but he quickly snapped out of it and responded, glancing at the bleeding Petalkit under his paws, "I'm sorry, Patchkit. But I don't know if a kit-killer is redeemable.", he bitterly growled.

Larchkit's angrily swiped at the air as he stood over his injured his sister, he faced his brother, "He did this to our sister.", anger gripping him, he turned to his mother, "Do it, Mum! Kill him!". Mapleshade's stomach curled up with disgust, her legs betraying her going shaky and weak. In desperation, Bloomheart landed a direct front slash over her nose, making her taste the diet under her as she fell. Appledusk yowled a warning. Free from her grip, she expected the scarred tom to instantly leap towards her kits however he ended up twisting on his heel and rushing off without another word. His dull fur merging into the black void of the night.

Glancing at Petalkit's deep wounds, Mapleshade thought she'd collapse from the stress. How could they possibly save her with injuries like that? She'd already killed Ravenwing, the other Medicine cats would run away from her on sight. Warping Petalkit in her paws, the desperate mother pitifully tried washing away the blood. "Mapleshade-", Appledusk began.

"What?", Mapleshade snapped in fury - The last voice she needed to be hearing right now was that faithless tom's. Taken aback, Appledusk steadied his breathing, determination sparking in his green gaze, "We have to ask Myler for help. Twolegs are known for having powerful herbs."

Her fur instantly bristled. The black and white tom had already influenced her kits enough with his kittypet softness. Yet for the sake of keeping Petalkit alive, even Mapleshade wasn't stupid enough to decline. Giving Appledusk a single nod, she gently lifted Petalkit, barely breathing. Appledusk's tasted the air to pick up Myler's disgusting scent and flicked his tail for them to follow. Patchkit and Larchkit scrabbled at their father's paws, but Mapleshade gave them a muffled call, which they miserably obeyed. If Petalkit's life was endangered, she wants her sons at her side, not the faithless tom's.

Chapter 7

"Faster!", Mapleshade snapped as she knocked Larchkit away with a single flick of her paw. Her claws were unsheltered. As the brown kit rolled, he managed to get his footing, roughly landing on all fours. Catching his breath for a brief heartbeat, he charged in for another try. Moving like a snake, Mapleshade's front paw skimmed over the ground, attempting to trip him up. However, Larchkit darted away to the side, narrowly avoiding the attack. With an opening, he launched. She staggered back, when he took hold of her leg, using his thorn-like claws and teeth to dig into her thick fur.

His tail lashed with adrenaline and excitement. While Larchkit clung to her leg like an annoying tick, she leaned in, digging in her fangs into his defenceless tail. He squealed out with a mix of pain and shock. She licked away the small traces of blood that edges her lips. She shoved him off with her tail, sitting back, her throat aching as it panted. "Better.", she admitted. His face lit up with as she mewed her approval. "But you need to remember that cats have teeth, not just claws.", she advised, "Tuck your tail in next time.".

They began padding up the sandy slope, away from the running fresh stream. They headed towards their home, a small sandy hollow, with a dense clump of brambles up against an old oak, that served as a den. It's a nice quiet little spot, not too many loners or rouge ventured to. Being just close enough to the Four territories to act as a deterrent. While Mapleshade continued to address Larchkit, he listened with genuine intrigue, causing his bright eyes to sparkle, "If you try to grab an opponent like that, it's idler to land on their back, where they can't reach you. However it's little hard for you to

jump onto a fully grown cat's back with your current size, but there's not much we can do about that.". Larchkit nodded before dashing forward.

Mapleshade flopped to the crusty ground with a huff while Larchkit sniffed at the scraps of bones and fur from their last meal. Scratching at it a few times, Larchkit turned away from the disappointment, "When are we going to eat?", he moaned. Mapleshade didn't bother to raise her head as she lay there, "Hopefully when Appledusk and your littermates come back from hunting.", she mewed, "And let's pray to Starclan, that your father doesn't bring back frogs again.".

She heard a shuffled of sand as Larchkit landed next to her. He made whispering noises as boredom gripped him despite just having a training session a heartbeat ago. As they lay there, Mapleshade's thoughts mellowed out as she just simply began to focus on the world around her. There was a soft tinkling noise as the nearby stream lapped against the smooth stones that lay against it's edge. Branches of the oaks rustled as they steered from the wind weaving in between them, like a creature waking from slumber. A purr began to form as she felt the yellow sunshine warming her pelt, threatening to make her drift into sleep. However, she was brought back from her welcomed daze, when an unwelcome grey smudge on sky drifted over the blazing red eye of the sun, washing the land over a light layer of shade. Mapleshade muttered to herself, burying her head in her paws.

Her ear twitched as Larchkit's stomach growled at her to be feed. She couldn't hunt now, could she? Hesitantly, she glanced over to Larchkit. Despite his body noticeably lacking much-needed amount of fat for a 4 moon old kit, he was a remarkable size. Already larger than most of the fish that Appledusk somehow managed to drag back from the gorge river.

With an annoyed sigh, Mapleshade nudged the brown kit to move as she clambered to her shaky half-asleep paws. Letting off a gaping yawn and arching her spine into a stretch, she began padding towards the shelter of the canopy and undergrowth. "Since you're that hungry, I'll see if there's a mouse prowling about.", she told him, "Can I trust you to be by yourself for a bit?". Larchkit eagerly

nodded, "Oh, sure! You can trust me.", he mewed with the blinking innocence eyes act. Though, Mapleshade just snorted, "We'll see about that. I'll be back soon. I'll be in earshot, shout if anything happens.". Her tortoiseshell fur faded into the greens and browns of the woodland.

Creeping through the tall grass, she kept her paws as light as clouds, not to make the slightest sound. Under the safety of the short oak trees, Mapleshade was in her element. The sandy soil under her paws, packed tighter together, to create the faintest pawprints. Her mouth slipped open, taking in the lush and damp odours of the forest. She crouched down until her belly rested on the sandy ground, waiting. Then after several more heartbeats, what she looking for, the scent of a mouse came waffling onto her tongue. Finally. The fur of a brown creature, scuttled from under a tree root, sniffing through the piles of brown leaves, in search of precious nuts and seeds.

Slowly sliding forward, Mapleshade moved forward stiff and silent movement. She comes within only a rabbit-length of the mouse, still blissfully unaware of it's fate. Then she darted forward with the speed of a fox, snatching it up like it like a hawk before it could even react. It was all over when the mouse's spine meets the she-cat's fangs. Mapleshade couched there for a moment, the body of the mouse laying limp in her paws. "Thank you to Starclan for the life that has been given, to allow my family to be strong and healthy.", she preyed so quietly, it was no more than a whisper.

Raising her head from the floor, her eyes followed the route of the stream as it curved itself a path through the small wood, until the trees split to the side, allowing her to see the vast land beyond. Her whiskers twitched with nervousness as she watched the water flowing into the familiar flat plains of Riverclan, far in the distance. It had been two moons since they were exiled, but she still heard the fading call of the Clans. Would they ever have a place among the Clans? Or would they have to send the rest of their lives creeping in its shadow, always watching but never being a part of it. There was still Shadowclan and Windclan. However, Mapleshade could never take that first step.

Her ears become flat against her head, she was sick of living as a rogue. Her kits deserved better than this. She deserved better than this. Enough mucking around. No more shrugging it off. The cycle of the seasons was moving forward and it wasn't going to wait for them. If they waited for another 2 moons, then they would lose the critical advantage of having kits. Pity wouldn't come as easily for a group of cats, old enough to look after themselves.

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Appledusk scrobbled through the musty and tight Birch wood. Though there was water hidden among the roots and grains of dirt, it was the worst kind of water. He used to deep fresh clear water that sparkled in the early pale dawn sunlight. But the water here was just dirty. Seeped into and mixed with the earth, to just create mud. The low branches of the Birches made him feel like a bird with a broken wing, not able to fly free.

Patchkit bounced in front of him, chasing an imaginary object or at least something he couldn't see. "Stay away from scent marks, Patchkit!", he warned. This was the same woodland they'd spent their first night in exile. Still remembering Mapleshade's death threat still shaking him to the core to this very day, even so long afterwards. And to think this was the same she-cat he'd go out of his way to sneak off to see every night, the mother of his kits. None of this still didn't feel right, it still felt like a dream, that he hoped to wake up from.

Appledusk stared at Riverclan territory with envy, he uses to be filled with pride with every stride he took to patrol his borders and every life he took to feed his Clan. Slowing down, Patchkit caught his father sightseeing, blinking at him in confusion, "Why do we keep coming back here? There's no fish on land is there?", he asked innocently. Hurriedly, Appledusk was forced to make an excuse, vague enough so the kit couldn't spit it out to his mother by accident, "Just checking to see if this is a good hunting spot for your mother, that's all.".

Just then, stiffening up with alarm as he spotted a patrol. He couldn't be caught, not again! Quietly, he stepped back several

paces into the thicker shadows of the trees, slumping against a root, hoping not to be noticed, like a raindrop being lost to the earth. But there was still something nagging at him, keeping him on edge, not allowing him to settle in the comforting feeling of safety. What was he forgetting? Or who was he forgetting? His head wildly twisted as he desperately searched for Parchkit's bright white and ginger pelt. The overexcited kit was leaping and charging about like a headless fox near a fern patch, too wrapped up in his own fantasy to notice the incoming danger.

Resultantly, Appledusk forced himself away from his hiding spot, going into the open. All he hoped, was that his brown pelt bent into his surrounding and the musty smells of the wood was enough to hide him as he ran at full speed. He dived onto the kit like a bird of prey, wrapping his paws around him and ungracefully throwing both of them back. He was forced to seal Patchkit's jaw shut so he wouldn't squeal as they crush through the ferns. Nothing moved. Then the quiet muttering of the patrol as they slowly emerged from the silence as they passed by. Appledusk's ear twitched as he spotted his clanmates through the layer of leaves. He could easily name each one, who their parents were and their rank.

There was a sudden hollow hole in his chest as he noticed Perchpaw among the other Riverclan cats, looking on with a blank expression, unfocused. He'd grown since he last saw his apprentice. Another 2 or 3 moons and he'd be a warrior. Who was his new mentor? Were they training him well?

He didn't even dare breathe as they; smelt the air, rubbed their heads against the rough bark of the front line of birch trees and were gone as quickly as they came. He let off a massive gasp for air as his lungs began to ache. Slowly, he unravelled his paws, releasing his grip on Patchkit. The kits rolled out of the ferns, spitting out mouth-full damp earth. "Dad, you didn't have to do that!", he exclaimed with an annoyed expression, "You could've just warned me.".

Appledusk pulled the ferns aside, climbing out before talking, "When you're out in the wild Patchkit, you don't have the luxury of time. When danger arises you have to make split-second decisions

and go with it.", he explained, "It'll serve you well to learn that.".

Patchkit just looked at him with a dumbfounded look on his face, "I don't understand what you're saying.". Appledusk huffed and shrugged it off, "You will when you're older.", then he lowered his voice, "Hopefully.", muttering to himself.

Surprisingly, Patchkit's ears pricked, "What did you say?", he asked without a clue. Appledusk halted in his traces, gulping. This kit had the hearing of a bat! "Um- nothing, Patchkit. Just talking to myself.", Appledusk mewed quickly, trying to come up with an excuse. The white and brown tom fell into step along his father, curiosity and nerves causing his nose and whiskers to twitch like squirrel. "Are you ok? Tulipfur said talking to yourself is the first sign of madness.".

Appledusk shrugged, "Who knows, Patchkit. Who knows.".

He continued to walk deeper into the forest, leaving rivers of his old territory behind. Patchkit began kicking though the layer of muddy leaves scattered across the forest floor, creating a small path for himself. Appledusk sniffed at the stale air, making sure the patrol had gone however a strong scent Riverclan still lingered. He stopped, turning around to look at the scent marks, now some distance away. He checked again, opening his mouth to gather more details; A single nearby Riverclan scent, the fresh smell of milk, a nursing Riverclan Queen of young kits possibly? But what was a Queen doing all the way out here alone? With a flick of his tail, he signalled for Patchkit stop in his tracks. The young kit become panicked within a slight heartbeat, "Get into cover.", Appledusk ordered. His son obeyed, leaping behind an old rotting log covered into slimy moss and mushrooms.

He took several paces back, scanning the nearby trees and bushes with alarm. The fur on his back ripplings like rifts on a water's surface. Where was she? Had she spotted him being so close to the border? He tried scenting the air, desperate to get an idea of the stranger's location. From the corner of his eyes, he thought he saw the briefest glimpse of a ginger tail as the cat weaved in between the dull tree trunks. The she-cat's scent was sweet and familiar but the wear of time had flattened his memory. He growled to himself,

he knew this cat, it just on the tip of his nose. If only he could remember.

Then suddenly, a speckled dark orange head was directly in front of his face. Appledusk staggered back in shock, barely managing to keep his jaw sealed, not allowing the whale of alarm to escape. His heartbeat quicken as he recognized Reedshine standing in front of him. A calm friendly smile on her warm orange face. "Hello, Appledusk.", she quietly mewed. The brown tom felt like ice had formed over his paws, freezing him to the spot. He couldn't move. A wave mixed with shame and relief flowed through him, so much, that he barely noticed Reedshine's thick fur rubbing against his cheek. A loud yet soft purr rang from her throat. He gave in, pressing his head into her but quickly flinched away. This wasn't right.

"What are you doing here? How did you find us?", he asked his old mate. She took a step back, looking at him with a blank expression, "You make it too easy. Ever Riverclan warrior has spotted you at least once, lingering on the borders.", she responded. Appledusk's gaze was fixed on her swallow water blue eyes, his tail twitching. He wouldn't let the topic slip, "Reedshine, it's nice to see you but I can't stay here - you can't stay here. If a patrol sees us-".

"I'm not going anywhere.", she intruded, laying her long tail over his shoulders, clinging to him like a leach. She leaned over until they were touching noises, "Not until I tell you the news.". Appledusk stiffens up, his fur becoming hot and sticky.

He gulped before asking the obvious, "What news?".

She smirked, "Our kits, you silly furball.". It felt like a broken tree branch had stabbed him right through the chest. Kits? Reedshine carried on, her hot breath on his muzzle, "Two beautiful she-cats and one handsome tom are in the nursery as we speak. And it's unfair if they grow up without a father.". With those words, Appledusk shook off her tail from his broad shoulders and staggered back. What was she talking about? Unfair not to have a father?

However, every step Appledusk took back, Reedshine would step forward, never allowing any distance between them. "Come back to me, Appledusk. Things have calmed down, they might listen to reason now. You won't know until you try.", Reedshine pleaded, her voice cracking up like a fire with emotion. He paused, looking into her eyes again, thinking on his words carefully. Until he eventually decided to be straight with her, "I can't.", he muttered. The edges of her lips twitched as they threaten to raise up in a snarl. Her pupils narrow to black cracks against a murky blue background of her eyes. "What?", she gasped with a grudge.

"Not yet at least. My first litter stills need me.", he explained.

"What about your second litter? Don't they matter?", she muttered. Quickly, Appledusk nodded, "Of course they do. I love all my kits equally. But you have an entire Clan and safe territory to help you raise them.", he argued, "While the other three haven't got anyone. Or safe place to call home. All they have is me and Mapleshade.".

"This is all Mapleshade doing isn't?", Reedshine quietly mewed.

Appledusk narrowed his eyes, "Excuse me?".

"We all heard about it two gatherings ago. How Mapleshade threatened Echopaw in a stone hollow at Highstones. And when the Medicine cats returned to investigate, they had found Ravenwing body there, brutally murdered.", she revealed, "And when I first heard that, I knew instantly that couldn't have been you.". Appledusk blinked at her. He was fully aware of Ravenwing's murder, he'd been there. But Mapleshade threatening an apprentice? She'd never uttered a word to him about that. The dark ginger she-cat seemed to sense Appledusk's growing doubt in his mate. She brushed her tail across his flank as he sat there on the earthy floor.

Appledusk raised his head from the floor, realising his chance to check something incredibly important. Something that could seal their future. "So, does Shadowclan and Windclan know about me and Mapleshade?", he asked. As Reedshine slowly nodded, Appledusk felt like he was dragged to the bottom of a deep lake, "Yes, Darkstar and Oakstar told them everything.", she confirmed.

Silence hung over Appledusk for a moment as he tried to make sense of the new information. It took a while for it to sink in, Reedshine watching him. He gave off a long-lasting hopeless sigh. Mapleshade wasn't going to like this. Not one bit. His hardly noticed Reedshine's black wet nose sniffing around the base of his ear. Then he felt a sudden stab of pain as she placed a paw on it, finching away from her again. Her eyes had darkened over, "Did Mapleshade do this to you?", Reedshine questioned, close to his ear.

"What are talking about?", he asked, uneasy.

She looked up at him, "The scars around your ears. They'd only be there if someone was constantly cuffing you over the ear.", she pointed out. Appledusk's mind becomes numb as if freezing over like a river in leaf-bare; the new kits, having no chance of having a future in the Clans and learning his own mate was scaring him. It was all a little overwhelming. To be honest with himself, Mapleshade would often kick him on the flake or cuff him over the ear, but by this point, he'd gotten so used to it, that the idea of it being a problem was almost non-exist. So, much that it was giving him permanent damage. His concerns then drifted over to his Patchkit, Larchkit and Petalkit. Were they are any risk from their own mother?

While in his whirling strings of thought, there was a faint sound rustling, then a large gasping noise from behind the rotting log. "You still need to breathe while hiding, Patchkit!", Appledusk scolded, mewing towards his son hiding spot. He always made that mistake.

Reedshine turned to look in the direction Appledusk was facing. Surprisingly calm, Reedshine called out the hiding kit, "You can come out, little one. I'm not going to hurt you.", she mewed with a clear echoing voice. Appledusk rose to his paws, into a defensive position. What was she going to do? Slowly, Patchkit's ginger and white pelt appeared from under the bull brown log, nervously slipping out into the open. Patchkit slowly approached the strange she-cat, nose twitching like a rabbit, "Are you a Riverclan cat?", he asked, his weariness turning to curiosity. Reedshine nodded, "Yes, I am.".

Patchkit took a moment to think before speaking again, "I know you. You're that she-cat that stood up for Daddy back in the Riverclan camp.". It then hit him, making him being struck by worry. Patchkit could have overheard the entire conversion. *If he told Mapleshade, she would have his head!* Reedshine didn't seem to notice Appledusk's fear scent and continued to address the kit, "It nice see that you remembered me.", she mewed, smiling.

Patchkit's mouth then arched up as he smiled back, a large sunny grin. A small purr could even be heard. Clearly, Patchkit took a liking to the friendly she-cat. Admittingly, his kits hadn't come across a non-hostile stranger in a long time. It was certainly been a weird experience for Appledusk himself, when he got banished. Clanmates and even kin, he'd trusted his entire life and would even die for, suddenly become aggressive, treating him like the enemy. All because he was a bit too reckless when it comes to love. It was hard enough for himself, he could hardly imagine what it must be like for a kit.

"What were you talking to Daddy about?", the calico kit asked, "Something about his second litter. Are you going to have more of my brothers and sisters?". Appledusk's ear immunity began uncontrollably twitching. *Fish-guts!* Whatever came next, could easily blow out of proportion, into a very awkward situation. How could he possibly try to explain this to Patchkit?

Reedshine held her head proudly up into the air, purring, "I already have. Three beautiful kits.". He couldn't help notice something oddly missing, "Have you even named them yet?", he mewed, curious. Had they literally been born yesterday? Patchkit insanity leapt in front of Reedshine, rearing up onto his back legs in his excitement. "Can I help name them?", he yelled out in his high-pitch kit voice. Patchkit was taking this whole situation remarkably well. Appledusk nervously glanced beyond the dense shadows of Larch wood, into Riverclan's bright sunny territory. How far away was the patrol by now? All this racket could put them in needless danger.

Reedshine shifted round, until she was directly facing Patchkit, even leaning forward until she reached Patchkit's low level. "Well, there are three kits. So we can name one each. I've already thought of one, Willowkit, for my grey tabby daughter. Do you like it?", she

mewed. Quickly, Patchkit nodded with his eyes tight shut, "I love it! It's perfect for my little sister.", he politely commented. What was Reedshine playing at? Appledusk licked his lips, trying to bury the suspicion under the pride of becoming the father of the new litter.

Then Reedshine turned round to face her old mate, waiting with intensity in her cold stare. It was his turn then. The other daughter and single son were the only ones that reminded namelessly. He had to think through this carefully, this would be the name, one of his kits would have carry around for the rest of their lives. He quickly raced through possible names for his reminding two kits; Ivykit, Mistkit, Meadowkit- He kept on running down the list, until eventually coming to his favourite, but one only good for a she-cat.

"I'll name our other daughter, Shykit.", he softly muttered under his breathe. Reedshine blinked thoughtfully a few times before nodding with a pleased grin. Appledusk gave a nod back. At least she seemed to like it.

Their moment of silent staring was bluntly ended by Patchkit frantically bouncing on the spot, causing the leaves under him to scatter. The two grown cats turned to face the young kit. "My turn, my turn!", he repeated, forcefully grabbing their attention. "Go on then, little one.", Reedshine patiently mewed. The kits landed hard on his paws, boldly blurting out his answer with a hurried voice, "I want to name the tom, Applekit!", he turned to Appledusk with beaming eyes, "After you, daddy.".

Instantly, He was taken back. Patchkit would actually name his own little brother after him? Why not Mapleshade? However, Appledusk let go of the doubt and just allow the honour and pride sink in for once, "Thank you, Patchkit.", he mewed. Patchkit's face lit up like the first star showing the signs of nightfall. Straightening up his spine, puffing up his chest, Appledsuk sat with a sturdy posture. His chin held up high in the air with pride. Though Appledusk himself reminded in exile, at least he knew his legacy and influence still reminded strongly in Riverclan with Reedshine's kits. Hopefully, all three would survive to grow up to be powerful warriors that could make his Clan proud. Reedshine seemed to beam with an equal amount of pride, her orange pelt appearing like the blazing setting

sun against the dusky twilight sky.

"Then it's decided, Willowkit, Shykit and Applekit, our new litter.", the orange Queen cheered, resting her head against Appledusk's broad shoulder again. The right words seemed to be stuck in his throat like feathers. Patchkit looked at his father with worry and confusion. The quickly warming patches of yellow sunlight against the brown woodland, told him Sunhigh was approaching.

With swallow sigh, Appledusk quietly slipped away from his old mate. She blinked at him, "Where you are going?", failing to hide away her desperately. "Thank you for everything, Reedshine. But I really need to get going. Larchkit and Petalkit will be getting hungry without their fresh-kill.", he muttered, slowly beginning to wander in the opposite direction of Riverclan, signalling for Patchkit to hurry after him with a sharp swish of the tail. "Tell Willowkit, Shykit and Applekit that I love them.", he muttered, "Goodbye.". Unsurprisingly, Patchkit kept flicking a glance behind his shoulder as they moved further and further away from the new Queen.

Suddenly, Reedshine dashed past the father and son, blocking their path, her blue eyes wild. "Before you go, Appledusk. You need to promise this one thing. Promise me, when Patchkit and his littermates are ready to fend for themselves, leave Mapleshade and come back to Riverclan. Back to me. We'll be able to sort something out.".

He paused, thoughtful. No matter how much it caused his heart to ache, from having kin, he'd never get to meet, he'd seen the utter anger in eyes of his Clanmates as he was marched out of camp. Called a 'traitor'. Time could do nothing to wear out the deep-rooted hatred of Half-clan mates and their kits. It was spoken against in the Warrior Code itself. Just giving the she-cat a sad smile, he shook his head, "We both know that could never happen, Reedshine. I'm not leaving Mapleshade.".

The feeling of deep betrayal rippled through Reedshine like a crashing wave as her fur flared up to twice it's size. With that, Appledusk snatched up Patchkit, the kit swinging in his jaws.

The young cat's eyes were fixed on the growing determination inside Reedshine. "Why are you doing this Appledusk? Out of union love? Or fear?", she challenged. However Appledusk just calmly shrugged, "Probably a bit of both.", he admitted, speeding past his old mate, running deeper into the musty woodland, turning his back on his old home, willingly this time.

As Appledusk continued to run, Patchkit softly turned his head up, asking, "Dad, are you still happy with being mates with Mummy?". Appledusk didn't answer.

Chapter 8

Small munching noises came centre of the clearing as Larchkit struggled to remove the last of the scrawny meat from the mouse's tiny bones. Mapleshade made sure to keep an ear pricked as she lay on her side in the shade brambles, just to make sure he didn't choke. He'd only been eating about a moon, so properly chewing and swallowing was still somewhat of a challenge. But then, others noises peaked her interest, coming from the far distance, the muffled words of the excited kit and a slimy sliding noise as a large item was being dragged across the ground. The odour of Riverclan drifted into the clearing.

Rolling to her paws, she sleepily staggered out of the den, as the brown and calico pelts of her son and mate appeared from the thick shrubs that bordered their home. Petalkit somewhere behind them. She wandered over to greet them while Larchkit ignored the return of his kin, too focused on his current meal. Appledusk had his back to her as he dragged a large speckled grey trout. It was good to know, they'd been eating well tonight. She had to admit, though she preferred squirrels or mice, she was starting to understand why Riverclan had such a fondness for things that came from the water. They were a little salty she admitted. but they had an easy-to-swallow sleek texture.

After Appledusk dumped the fish onto the sandy floor, Mapleshade rubbed her head against his in greeting, "Had a successful hunting trip I see.", she mewed while purring. Though, Appledusk just gave a nod in thanks, giving off a half-hearted smile. Something was on his mind. As Mapleshade sat in front of Appledusk, waiting for him to say something, Patchkit leapt into her line of sight. He began talking with a ridiculous speed, "Hey Mum, when me and Da-". However, Patchkit's open mouth was sealed closed by his father's long tail, blocking out the words from escaping. What was he

doing?

Swiping the mouse scraps to the side, Larchkit heading over the three cats, "Hey guys.", the young tom muttered. While the brown kit came close, Appledusk nose flickered as he smelt the swallowed air. "Having you been a training Larchkit again?", he asked with a scowl, eyeing the small trickles of deep red against Larchkit's dark brown pelt. Turning back to her, "I really need to talk to you, Mapleshade. About a lot of things.", he muttered.

However, she ignored him for a moment, quickly glancing to the brown shrubs Appledusk and Patchkit had clambered out of. Another heartbeat. Nothing. And no new cat scent apart from the cats already gathered in the clearing. "Where's Petalkit?", she demanded, "She was supposed to go on a hunting trip you.". Instantly Appledusk froze on the spot, staring at her blankly.

Patchkit's neck fur spiked to the sharpness of hedgehog's quills, "She wasn't with us.", he confirmed. Mapleshade angrily waited for Appledusk's exploration, "I thought she with you and Larchkit.", he admitted.

She stared back at him with a dumbfounded expression, "No, you mousebrain!". In anger, she struck a paw over his muzzle. Just as she was beginning to think he wasn't useless. She got to her paws, beginning to furiously pace around the small area, mumbling meaningless noises to herself.

Larchkit hurried after his mother as she took another sharp turn, worry caused the kit's voice to crack slightly, "What is going on? Is Petalkit missing? Mother!". However, Mapleshade was too much in a state herself to give off a proper answer.

Suddenly there was a shared state of panic among the two kits like

the sky was about to start crashing down with them. In his confusion and irritation, Larchkit began nipping and tugging at his weaker brother's ears, causing Patchkit to squeal. While Mapleshade runs her long craving claws against crusted soil, making a faint scraping noise. What was this family coming to? "Stop that.", Appledusk snapped in a calm yet firm tone, dragging the flailing Larchkit away from his bewildered littermate.

As Appledusk kept Larchkit pinned with a large single paw, trying to keep the kit from causing any more trouble, he turned to Mapleshade, "She couldn't have gone far. I sure I can pick up her scent easily if I retrace my steps-". However, the tortoiseshell rouge intruded him

mid-sentence with the flick of the tail for silence. "No, I'll go. You stay here with Larchkit and Patchkit.", she intruded, strolling away to the undergrowth, preparing to start her search. "But I'm the better trucker.", he insisted.

"I know you are.", she mewed, stopping in her tracks for a moment, "But I know Petalkit better than you do. I know where she might be and if she's not there- I'll allow you to lead the search.". Wasting no more precious time, she straining her legs muscles, she launched into a full script as the vines and brambles whipped against her faces as she left the small clearing in the dust.

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Keeping to a hunting crouch, she quietly slipped under another wiry fence, feeling it sharps silver edges skimming the tips of her bushy ginger fur. As she was able to stand up in open space again, the long fields of two-leg stretching out before her, with the occasional

lone standing two-leg structure. What they were used for or why Two-legs built them, Mapleshade couldn't care less. They were nonsensical brainless creatures and that's all she needed to know.

The fields almost radiating with an unnatural bright glow of greens and yellows like a ghostly flat version of Windclan's long moors. The air was so thick and dense here, she could almost feel it on the tip of her snout. Even having a texture to it, like trying to walk through a thick fog of powdery flower spores. Stepping over another dead weed, she began to wander in the direction of the red building, several fields across.

Mapleshade made sure to stick to the border fences of the farm fields, avoiding the centre at all costs. Trying to navigate through the endless golden grass, would be like trying to find her way through a snowstorm. Then she paused when she noticed a thick burrow of black smoke drifting into the air and a strange Thunder-like bellowing. The fur around her neck stiffened up into clumps like patches of brambles. Was there a fire? But there was no overpowering scent of burning, nor the glow of dancing flames or hissing as the fire crackled. Yet there was an acidic odour clenching to her nostrils, akin to the disgusting stretch of the Thunderpath. What was that?

Small specks of the earth began leaping like crickets as the ground itself began to rumble. Her tail bushed up and ears flattened hard against her skull. The blood began ringing in her ear tips as if a furious wind swirled inside of them.

Then suddenly, she yowled in terror and bolted out the way of a massive crimson Monster, darker than blood. In her panic, she drove into a nearby tangle of thorns, too scared to notice the thorns tearing at her fur, threatening to dig into the skin. What was it doing off the Thunderpath? Yet again, she'd never seen a monster quite like this before. Huge rotating silver claws ripped through and violently swallowing up the grains of seeds, it snatched up from the

grass blades. Constantly letting out a deafening roar as it worked to turn the entire field to scraps. Mapleshade could already see the trail of devastation it had left, the grass being completely flattened to the ground. Through rumbling tubes, the grass seeds were being puked out at an impossible speed, being dumped into a large hollow shell on the Monster's back.

If it bothered to devour all those seeds, why wasn't it bothering to digest it? Unless that was it's the stomach. A two-leg sat in the Monster's narrow clear head, wearing dull groggy pelts and muddy smudges streaked across its the creamy hairless face. It fiddled with shining sticks, that ended with bright coloured balls, from inside the Monster, somehow controlling the rampaging beast.

Thick smoke streamed out of its strange horns as it breathed that same foul odour, she'd scented earlier. She needed to get out of here. Fast! Despite the pain of the thorns now setting in, she clambered out of the spiky bush, her pelt mattered, now in ruin. All while fighting her own lungs to gain control of her stressed breathing. Somehow the male two-leg seemed to spot Mapleshade though the groggy sheet of ice in the Monster's head. It twisted a small silver object and with a grunt, the Monster slowly went from trembling and coughing smoke to dormant.

Too engulfed in the curse of fear, she reminded frozen as the Two-leg clambered down from the huge red Monster. It slowly approached; hands against its broad chest while doing a strange motion with it's lips, sucking them into its head to make a circle, causing a high-pitched insect-like noise. Pity glittered in its large round eyes. What would this thing feel pity for her? It was like a cat feeling sorry for a piece of fresh-kill.

Her spine arched and her lips drew back to show off a row of thorn-like teeth, gleaming in the pale sunlight. However, despite her threatening gestures, the Twoleg foolishly continued to approach

her, in some vain attempt to tame her into some kittypet. Get away from me! Just as the twoleg's hand was reaching out to touch her, Mapleshade let off a blood-curdling scream of anger, making her lungs feel like they could burst. Out of shock, the two-leg immediately and violently flinched away, grasping its hand defensive. It stared at her with widened eyes.

Not sticking around to see the Twoleg's further reaction, she spun on her heel and ran, far, far away. Not even daring to glance over her shoulder. She half-effected to feel the heavy footsteps of the Two-leg as it gave chase but it didn't. It just stood there and watched the terror-filled cat ran far into the distance. Didn't it think she was worthy prey? However, instead of letting herself be insulted by it, she just blinded herself with the lie she was too good for it.

Not caring anymore, Mapleshade continued to sprint at full speed. Once she found Petalkit, she would never be returning to this cursed wasteland.

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Mapleshade stormed over to the bright red Barn crisscrossed with white, a rain cloud of misery and irritation forming over to her drooping head. She had to go through a living nightmare just to fetch her daughter after she'd wandered off. She halted just a fox-length in front of the Barn's far wall. "Petalkit, I know you're here!", she angrily yelled out, "It's me. So Come out. We're going home!". Reminding standing, serval heartbeats slowly drifted by before calling out again, this time edged with a hiss, "Petalkit!".

Eventually, Petalkit's dusty brown pelt appeared as she crawled out from under the swallow dip in the earth, that served as the only cat-sized entrance to inside the Barn. She knew she'd be here. Not that Mapleshade, would ever want to go back inside that stuffy room with daunting mountains of brown hay. As Petalkit wearily and slowly approached Mapleshade, her long tail flopped against the ground with shame and her glare stayed fixed to the gravel floor. The she-cat once sleek fur was now scruffy and ruffled, pale yet deep pink scars covered Petalkit's whole neck and lower back. A permanent reminder of the dangers that crept in every shadow, waiting to tear half-Clans cats like her kits, to scraps.

It was only when the kit came directly in front of her mother, was she forced to meet Mapleshade's burning amber glare. This caused the kit to withdraw into herself like terrified prey with nowhere to hide, facing near death. They stared at each other with a stiff silence hanging over them. Petalkit tried to give her an innocent smirk but this just made Mapleshade scowl instead. "H-hi Mum.", Petalkit muttered so quietly, it was no more than a whisper.

"You got a lot to answer for when we get back.", she scoffed, "Let's go.", wrapping her thick tail around Petalkit and beginning to make the long journey home. "But, can't I say goodbye to Myler?", she asked hurriedly. Before Mapleshade could answer, that very cat with a familiar black and white round bubbly face came rushing out to see what the fuss was. "Petalkit? Who's out there?", he called out. But then immediately halted, "Oh.", he bowed his head in greetings, "Nice to see you again, Mapleshade.".

As he took another step forward, Mapleshade thrust forward, baring her long fangs right in the kittypet's face, causing him to stagger back. "Why did you bring my kit here?", she snapped. Myler blinked with ignorance as if he was unknowing of the whole situation.

Though he managed to somehow keep a sickly polite and calm

manner as he shook his head, "I assure you, Petalkit came on her own. She only wanted a little break from all the hunting and training you do.". Mapleshade growled at him. Was he suggesting her kits would rather isolate themselves in a barn than learn the proper ways of becoming a great warrior? While Mapleshade's attention was focused on Marley, Petalkit managed to duck under her mother's tail, freeing herself.

"He's right, Mother. I came here by myself.", the young she-cat insisted.

Mapleshade narrowed her eyes, unconvinced, "You're are nothing but a kit. You're too young to understand how those things work, Petalkit. Kittypets like Myler lack any sense of purpose or honour. Trust me, you don't want that life.". Petalkit just groaned in response. Then Myler swallowed before managing to slip in a useless comment, "Actually, Mapleshade. I'm a loner. Not a kittypet. I still catch my own prey.", he mumbled, not talking properly because of nerves. Like there was a difference.

"Then why do you still wear that collar?", she pointed out, her amber eyes flicking over the brown thick collar tightly wrapped around his neck, like a fangless adder having no way to inject it's deadly venom, so it strangled its prey instead.

The skinny tom's fur ruffed with a wave of shame, "I don't wear this because I choose to, Mapleshade. The twolegs did something to me- made me fall asleep and when I woke up again, this ugly thing was around my neck. I've tried many, many times to get it off but nothing works. It's stuck there for good.". The tips of Mapleshade's whiskers twitched slightly, feeling a small amount of sympathy for Myler forming. Just having a terrifying encounter with a twoleg herself. Yet, buried those feelings quickly, forcing them down into the outer rims of her thoughts. This was a waste of time. She'd come to get Petalkit back, nothing more.

Feeling the strain on her throat, Mapleshade let off a swallow sigh, addressing Myler once again, now getting to business, "I know Tulipfur trusted you and you saved my family. And I am grateful for that. But doesn't give you the excuse to indoctrinated my kits into your kittypet ways.".

Petalkit argued back on Myler's behalf, "He's not indoctrinating us in anything. All he is kind and wants to help others. Promise!", she mewed, leaping to her paws and puffing up her chest. "Hush.", Mapleshade scolded. Luckily, it seemed to do the job, the single word like a claw, sealing Petalkit's jaw shut.

Myler however, stared blankly at two other cats, his green eyes becoming a dull musty lime colour as they clouded with sorrow. The Queen rounded up a sorrow-filled Petalkit with her tail again and began marching her away from the Barn.

The cracks in that calm manner were showing as he let the streams of emotion start to seep through, "Mapleshade please. I may not know what fully happened, but I can tell your family has suffered a great injustice thanks to the other Clan cats.", he begged, "And from what I've already seen, they're not to stop until one of you is dead. I may not be what you imagined but if anything happens, if there's an emergency, know you can also come to me for help.".

With another sigh, Mapleshade made sure the message loud and clear, "Stay away from my family.".

Slowly, tagging at Petalkit to keep pace, they began making a distance between the Barn, leaving Myler sitting there, shrilling up like a rotting berry. Petalkit's head and tail drooping as she walked. Small crunching sounds could be heard as their harden paw pads stepped over the loose pebbles that formed the gravel path. Just

then, before Mapleshade and Petalkit make it down the muddy slope leading away from the Barn, Myler suddenly call after them, "Mapleshade, wait!".

Reluctantly, she halted, straining her leg muscles not to make her wander off. "What?", she rudely spat. Myler came careening down the slippery hillside, grinding his claws hard into the ruff earth, stopping himself from crashing into Mapleshade. She waited as he caught his breath.

"I need to give a warning. About, that Thunderclan cat who tried to kill Petalkit- Bloomheart, I think he's called.".

In that heartbeat, it felt as if Mapleshade had just swallowed a boulder, her throat closing up at the mention of that name, becoming dry and hollow. Petalkit also reacted violently, staggering back and stuttering, fear causing her to fail to form any words, only meaningless babble. The kit's legs become like slushy snow, barely being able to hold themselves together as they viciously shook like weak trees swinging in a rushing storm. "What. about. Him?", she slowly muttered.

The black and white loner paused, forced by habit to shift gravel under his paw pad with his short white claws. "It's just that there have been some rumours going around, that some rogue Thunderclan cat has been terrorizing the local kittypet population. Apparently, some are already dead.", he explained as if there was a stone stuck in the back of his throat. "So just be careful out there.", he warned.

Mapleshade gave him a hard glare. The fur on the back of her neck rippling like waves crashing against the rocky shore, in an explosion of white foam. Protectively, wrapping her tail around a speechless Petalkit once again, beginning to march away, "We can look after selves.", She commented, "If he dares to show his face again, he'll quickly regret it.".

Chapter 9

By the time they'd return to the cover of natural grasses and trees, the sky had darkened as the sun began to edge closer to the horizon, to the world beyond sight. With claw marks of pink clouds streaking across the sky, like a tabby's markings. Mapleshade began to worry if Appledusk had gone off and done something stupid with the unknown location of his daughter.

Petalkit had become so paralyzed with fear, she refused to walk. Forcing Mapleshade to carry the fast-growing kit by the scruff, causing her muscles to strain and ache with every step. It was hard enough now but another moon and she couldn't imagine how hard it would try to carry her kits by the scruff, probably impossible without injuring herself.

Having enough, Mapleshade began swinging her head faster and faster, until she gained enough momentum to swing Petalkit across her shoulders. The brown kit reluctantly shifted sideways, so she lay on Mapleshade's board back. Just she's had been when they'd crossed the raging river. Mapleshade shuttered.

With Petalkit out the way, Mapleshade was able to travel at a steady pace past the rows of large oak trees. The roots of Oaks protruded out of the ground like giant brown worms, that had tried desperately, to borrow back into the safety of the ground but had failed, frozen in time by being enclosed in a layer of ice-like bark.

Taking a step back now, letting the true atmosphere sink into her bones and mind, allowed her to see the truth. The twisting and tangling angels of the trees here, creeped her out for the first time, despite being here for half a moon. And with cats like Bloomheart and Oakstar still lurking out there, they couldn't remind in one place for too long. They needed to get out of here as soon as

possible.

Eventually, the former Thunderclan Queen spotted a moving outline of cat through the layer of dark brambles. Climbing past them, into the clearing, she noticed Appledusk's claws stressed claws marks scattered all across the crusty floor. The trout lay across the floor, reduced to nothing but a pile of thin wiry bones and mushy white meat. At least they'd hadn't eaten all of it. As soon as the Riverclan tom noticed the returning she-cats, he sped over to them. Larchkit and Patchkit were tucked away in the thick bramble den, past asleep. Larchkit's snorting echoing through the swinging branches of the trees like a bird song.

Mapleshade arched her spine, forcing Petalkit to roll sideways, falling from her mother's back. "Petalkit!", Appledusk called excitedly, coming over and nuzzling Petalkit like they'd been separated for seasons. However, Petalkit quickly flinched away, giving her father a bitter growl, "Ok, ok, Appledusk. I'm not dead. You can stop going all lovey-dovey over me, thanks.", she mewed with a dry snarky tone.

The cream tom blinked at her, until letting off a sudden sigh. Mapleshade could almost imagine the blood under Petalkit's skin flowing with acidic venom. She'd gone through all the trouble dragging her back here and now Petalkit was already being rude to her father? Angered, Mapleshade caught the sand-coloured kit's attention by flicking her snowy white tail over Petalkit's shoulders. She slowly turned to face her mother. They silently held their gaze, reading each other.

Narrowing her eyes, Mapleshade could see the dark rims circling her bright green eyes. Eyes that perfectly reflected the cat that she still refused to acknowledge as her father. Holding herself back, Mapleshade finally allowed logic to take control for once. Straining herself, Mapleshade padded over to the fish carcass, stripping out

long strings of pale meat with her curling claws. Raking at the fish's spine again, she gathered the scraps of food that still clung to the bones, making a small pile of food. After gripping a bone from the pile and spitting it away, she grabbed the small pile of fish and dumped at Petalkit's paws. The kit blinked at her.

"Eat up.", she ordered, "After that, you're going straight to bed. I'll deal with you in the morning, once we're all in a better mood.". With another pause, Petalkit bent down, hurriedly eating her meal. Only within a few mouthfuls, the fish had already gone and without another word, Petalkit dragged herself towards the den, her tail and head drooping with shame. As Petalkit slipped into the bramble patch, there suddenly sounded excited whales from Patchkit and Larchkit. "You're back!", Larchkit shouted out, not considering his loudness. "Go to sleep!", Mapleshade yelled over to them. The racket quickly died down but hushed whispers could still be heard from inside the den.

Grumblings to herself, Mapleshade began to wander from the clearing, needing to clear her head. Appledusk fell into step beside her, twinning his tail around hers and their flanks brushing against each other. The sky had now turned to a murky dark blue, turning the landscape around them to almost glow with different shades of blues and blacks. No animals sounded in the distance, only the echoing sound of silence, howled between the claw-life branches of the forest, stretching up to try and tear at the sky. Unnaturally long shadows were cast over the woodland floor, like gray stale water. A heavy storm cloud hovered over them, blocking out the icy glow of the moon, not even the mighty tug of the wind being able to drag it away. The threat of raging rain a constant.

As they left the clearing behind, Mapleshade finally sighed, "I don't know what to do with that kit.", she muttered. Appledusk gave an understanding nod, "I know she can be tough to deal with. But

things are hard for her as well.", he mewed, "Where did she even go anyway?".

They settled at the base of an oak tree, just beyond the small clearing. Sitting on a floor of decaying brown leaves, Mapleshade looked at her trusted mate, "I found her at the Barn with that kittypet, Myler.", she mewed bitterly. His ear's twitch to the side thoughtful, "Isn't he that cat who helped us escape the Barn when Thunderclan attacked?".

She nodded, "Yes.", she mumbled, "Him.".

"Well, at least we know she was safe.", Appledusk breathed, relieved. Mapleshade sprang to her paws, offended. "Safe?", she exclaimed, "If we let our daughter mix with kittypets like him, she'll become soft. She was born a Clan cat and that's what she reminds as."

"But how can we be Clan cats without a Clan?", he questioned, surprisingly on edge. His long tail sliding across the floor. She looked at him as if he was a stupid apprentice on their day out of camp, "We've been planning this for moons, mousebrain! We're going to try and join Shadowclan or Windclan.".

A strange silence hung over Appledusk like the massive storm cloud directly above his head. "That's actually something I needed to talk to you about, Mapleshade.", he admitted, "Among other things. Now when I tell you what happened- you need to let me explain everything before getting outraged.". Like he wasn't doing that already. Seeing she had no objections get, he reluctantly continued, "When I and Patchkit were out hunting, we come close to the Riverclan border and I accidentally ran into Reedshine...".

"Reedshine.", Mapleshade immediately and loudly exclaimed, disgusted. However, Appledusk quickly came to his own defence, "Like I said, it was an accident. I didn't expect to run into her. She literally came out of nowhere.", he groaned, "Anyway that's not the point.".

Mapleshade growled with her long white fangs bared, "Then what is the point?!".

"The fact she's been to the last two gatherings when we haven't. She knows things we don't. Things that are useful to us. One of those things being the fact, that Oakstar and Darkstar have told Shadowclan and Windclan everything!", he gasped, struggling not to raise his voice to a shout, "Everyone knows, Mapleshade.".

This news hit Mapleshade as if she'd hit with the weight and speed of a massive Two-leg monster, slamming into her. Staggering back, the words caught in her throat. Her mind becomes numb for a heartbeat-like the blazing sun boiling away rainwater, until her mind with slimy mud. "It doesn't matter if they know or not, they'll let us join.", she protested, "They'll be missing out on the best warriors in the forest by rejecting us!".

"Why would they?", he questioned again, "As far as Shadowclan and Windclan are concerned we're nothing but a group of traitors, murderers and Half-breeds. They're not going let us join them.".

"We're not traitors! Thunderclan are. They exiled innocent kits.", she spat, "And as for Reedshine- I don't believe any of her rubbish.".

Now it was Appledusk's turn to stare at his mate like she was mousebrained, "Why would you? You think she's lying?", leaning in. Mapleshade turned a cold shoulder to him, "Of course she would. That snake-heart would do anything to win over affection. If I ever see her face and the faces of her kits, I'll tear their eyes out!".

"There you go again!", he howled.

"What?", she growled back.

"All those threats and acts of violence!", he pointed out, "You constantly claiming, 'it's them that's wrong' or 'it all their fault'. Well, can you explain when; you threaten a Medicine cat, actually killing one and then training underaged kits. Care to enlighten me on this mysterious cat, who reasonable for all those actions? Because it can never be your fault, can it? It always has to someone else.".

"That's because it is always someone else's fault!", she argued, a hint hatred in her voice, "I have to train my underaged kits because Oakstar forced them to be exposed to a dangerous world. And that 'Medicine cat', Ravenwing- well, he just had it coming to him.".

"But doesn't excuse the way you treat your own family. How you threaten to kill me on the very first day and constantly abusing me by cuffing me over the ear or kicking me in the flank. And now, you're slowly letting out your frustration onto your own kits. Don't pretend you don't make Larchkit bleed after every training session.".

Mapleshade desperately wanted to yowl out on the top of her lungs, though the creeping trees, wanting to prove him wrong, forcing it onto him. However, she'd held herself back, barely. Something kept her back. She was curious. On where he was going with this. So she reminded silent for a heartbeat, allowing him to continue. Despite the raging storm of anger burning her straight to the core by not letting run free.

"We have no knowledge of herbs between us, so it's a miracle that none of Larchkit's wounds has gotten infected yet.", he mewed, seemly more calm without Mapleshade sending counter arguments down his throat, "If you want to better be than cats like Oakstar and Bloomheart. Then stop. Just stop.".

He took a breath before continuing, his chest huffing up to large a size. Doubt flashed in his holly coloured for just a heartbeat. Seeds of concern began to spout in the Mapleshade's head. What was he going to say? She stood a little straighter, preparing for the worst. The low sharp black branches behind Appledusk's head shook in the howling wind, threatening to claw at his slightly tufted ear tips.

"They're off your milk now, so if you don't stop, I'll happily take them with me. Away from you.", he whispered quietly. Mapleshade froze, her mouth open in a silent gasp. He continued to look his mate directly in the eye, "You can get yourself killed. But I swear to Starclan, I'd rather die before I let you brag my kits into whatever hell-hole you're going to.".

"You wouldn't dare.", she spat, the spit dripping her mouth like some kind of chained dog, hungry for flesh. She stood close to him, sheltering her long curling claws, scraping them across a nearby rock, hidden among the thick ferns. Like claws scraping against a skull.

However, Appledusk's paws stay firmly rooted to the ground, refusing to be shaken by her threats. "Oh, I would, Mapleshade. Tell me, if Petalkit decided to go back to Myler, would you kill him? If the opportunity ever arises, would you kill Reedshine? If you ever came across my other kits, would you murder them too?".

"Shut up! You know nothing about me!", she screeched louder than an owl, the shout echoing far into the distance, deeper into the shadow covered forest. Soft squeaks rang from inside the clearing as the kits began to steer. But Mapleshade didn't care and neither did Appledusk. "Mum? Dad? What's happening out there?", Patchkit's innocent voice asked, calling out to them.

Refusing to back down, Appledusk continued to taunt and question

her authority, "When we were first exiled, you said you'd kill me if I ever thought of leaving you. And that's exactly what I'm doing now.", he sneered, a snarl forming over his mouth, circling her, "So what are you waiting for? Kill me, you're own mate. And If you're willing to kill your mate, why not stop there? Why not kill your kits? Because that's exactly what you'll do one day, Mapleshade, if you continue to down this path-".

Suddenly, Mapleshade just let it all out, letting the beast of fire and death within her go rapid. Screaming with fury and slamming into Appledusk. However, he expected it, rearing up and knocking her away mid-lunge with his large front paws. The frantic movement came from within the den as the sounds of battle raged on. She landed on all fours, hard. Switching tactics, she went in low as Appledusk tried to get back all fours himself.

Spinning while still moving forward, she swept her leg from under Appledusk, causing him to lose his footing. Dazed, Appledusk attempted to make the distance to give himself time to recover. But Mapleshade wouldn't allow it, outstretching her front paws, grabbing both shoulders, digging in her claws until blood spilled. Appledusk shuddered. It didn't feel like it was a cat she was fighting anymore. Let alone the cat she loved and had kits with. But only a piece of prey. A thing that only existed to torn apart and killed.

Seeing the new look in Mapleshade's amber eye, Appledusk gained a new need for survival. Realising he'd been holding back, Mapleshade gasped as Appledusk's jaw fastened over her forehead, as quick as pike leaping out of the water, grabbing an unsuspecting insect from mid-air. Yowling in pain, Mapleshade was viciously thrashed from side to side until Appledusk's teeth loosened on her head, sending her crashing against a tree trunk. The bark shredding at her shoulder fur. Appledsuk approached her, warily, "Satisfied?", his voice heavy with a pant.

However, a spark of hatred still blazed on inside her and Appledusk's mockery just enlightened it again. Feeling the tree behind her, an idea slipped in her head. Appledusk flinched back in shock as his mate scrambled up the tree faster than a squirrel. Digging her claws into the bark, she twisted and swung until she lay, perched on a low hanging branch. The Riverclan tom watched her intensely.

Not giving him time to plan a counter-attack, she sprang from the air, directly above the tom's head. She landed roughly on his head, holding on with her teeth as he desperately thrashed around. She only let go until she heard a satisfying ripping sound from his ear. Losing her grip, she fell to the side to avoid a front paw swipe, rolling until she was in the tom blind spot. Grabbing him again, she dugs her long fangs into his pelt, now stained with red. Reacting quickly, Appledusk countered by using his larger and stronger build, bringing all his weight on top of her. As both of them skidding across the sandy ground, both their pelt becomes ragged and filled with itchy sand grains.

She gasped for air desperately after air was torn from her lungs. The cream tom doing the same, lying beside her. Grabbing her change, she was on her paws first. Digging her long claws into the tom's throat, causing his mouth to hang open, in a silent yowl. Mapleshade just watched him. He made strange gurgling noises as he threatened to choke on his own blood, bubbling into a sickly red foam at the back of his throat. Yet somehow he managed to string words together through his gasping, "How- are you going to explain- this? How you- going to justify killing their father- right in front of their eyes?", finally ending the sentence with a hollow gasp, swallowing the air. His pure black pupils were flickered towards the clearing.

Hesitantly, Mapleshade's eyes began to follow the path of the fish scented cat's sight. But before she could fully turn her head,

suddenly a horrid yowl of utter terror split the night air in two, "Mum! What are you doing?!", Patchkit screamed out. Mapleshade snapped out of her bloodthirsty dream state.

All three kits stood there, backed up against a fallen wind-battered tree trunk, their faces just speechless. Even Petalkit's. Immediately Mapleshade flinched away from Appledusk, recoiling away from her long claws away from his flesh. Now free, Appledusk twisted onto his stomach, gasping for air and spitting mouthfuls of blood onto the sandy earth. His pink open mouth like a cloud, raining with thick dark blood. A heavy heartbeat thundered in her ear tips as she staggered further away from her victim. Her fangs and fur now stained with a sticky crimson.

Barely noticing a dark brown shadow moving against the solid black light of the night as Larchkit rushed over his mother's side.

The words refused to form together as her kits continued to stare at her with judging yet innocent expressions. Then Patchkit turned to his father, still violently driving in among the undergrowth, like a fish flopping hopelessly against the river bank as it's predictor waited for it to wear itself out. The white and ginger kit rushed over to his father's side, leaving a frozen Petalkit behind, gently placing his paw on Appledusk shoulder, shaking him desperately. "Dad?", he asked softly but with a hint of fear. Appledusk twitched. "Dad?", he repeated, with more urgency.

Had she killed him? Her version became blurred as a fog of confusion floated in front of her sun-like amber eyes. She didn't. She

couldn't have.

Then, Appledusk's gasps slowly become heavy breaths, gaining control. Digging his claws into the ground, he heaved himself up until he sat upright, his back legs still weak and limp. Patchkit leapt for joy, pressing his head against Appledusk's bony leg, purring. The two mates stared at each other.

Appledusk glared at her; His left ear was torn and the back of his neck fur was ruffled, stuck into clumps because of drying crusted blood. Bright ginger fur scraps clung to his claws still out.

Mapleshade blanky watched him; Her chest dripping with streams of blood. Her shoulder in tatters, shredded with loose bark and claw marks. The tips of her toes also smudged with the same red liquid. How much was hers and not his?

The wind howled again, dancing around them, whispering unknown messages into their ears.

Slowly, Appledusk's lips lifted, curling up into a venomous, revengeful, hateful snarl. The kits watched helplessly as the invisible yet unbreakable spider webs of love that should have bonded those cats' hearts for an entity, turned cold and withered away, seeping into the frosty earth. Getting onto his shaky paws, Appledusk's head swung from side to side, "You tried to kill me.", he simply mewed, "You, the mother of my kits, tried to murder me. In the front of them.".

Mapleshade couldn't answer. Patchkit's eyes widen to the size of owl's eyes, "Mother- was trying to k-killing you?", he exclaimed, his voice quickly become stale as he trailed off his words.

While Mapleshade, Larchkit and Petalkit just reminded mute.

Voiceless.

"Now, I just hope they now see the cracks. Because I can!", he uttered, "Because we're through! I can never be mates with likes of you again, foxheart!", he hissed, with the sharpness of yelping fox. Forcing Patchkit off his leg with his tail. With nothing more to say, Appledusk twisted on his heel, beginning to limp into the shadowy void of the night covered forest. "No.", Mapleshade breathed. His creamy pelt becomes paler as his outline was swallowed up by the darkness.

"No!", Mapleshade yelled. Larchkit's clung to her leg, tighter, whimpering. "Dad!", Patchkit screeched out, taking a few small steps towards his quickly disappearing father.

"That's it!", Petalkit cried out, her eyes blazing with fury and wildness, "I hate this life! I hate this family!". Her deep scars almost glowing a pale pink against the Moonlight, as the silver eye of the moon was allowed to drown the night in it's cold light. Before Mapleshade could do anything, Petalkit, like her father, twisted round, throwing herself through the thick brambles, running far away. Probably back to that black and white loner. Yet, Mapleshade couldn't speak. Why wasn't she speaking? Why wasn't she moving? Why wasn't she doing anything? Why was she letting this happen?!

Then there were two. Patchkit standing in the middle, watching Appledusk, little more than a cream coloured smudge against the still-frozen landscape. And Larchkit still clinging to his mother, unmoving like a boulder against a river's swift current.

"Patchkit-", the Queen finally managed to utter, trying to reach out to her lost son. However, Patchkit just gave her a fear-filled glance, creeping backwards like a scattering ant. "I can't do this.", he

mumbled, "I can't watch you become a murderer.".

As a result, Larchkit snapped, "Dad's a murderer as well!", he argued.

But Patchkit shook his head, "But that was an accident, Larchkit.", he looked over his shoulder, "And at least Dad regretted it.". Before charging after Appledusk in the far distance.

The clearing was now empty and hollow. Only a distressed son and mother reminded. The other three, now gone and free.

Mapleshade crumbled to the floor. Burying her face into a sea of ginger. The pain surging through her body, turning her bones to dust and her already swollen heart to ashes.

"Mum!", Larchkit gasped, desperately shaking her, "What do we do?! What do we do?! Please! Mother! Make them come back!".

Mapleshade's head lifted, to look into the sky through the claws of the branches. The storm cloud that once dominated the sky, had finally given up to tear off the wind, being dragged away. Only leaving a clear sky. Now only the glow of the Moon and Stars reminded. The stars. Endless pure white eyes staring down, from the heavens above her, looking right through her, all the way to her rotten core.

"Mum!", Larchkit's repeated, deafeningly close to her ear.

Her jaw tore open, as she whaled out to towards Starclan, the thing she'd trusted blindly, all her life, "Why have you done this to me, Starclan?!". Her cry echoing. But then the words of her former mate

rang inside her head, like the echo in a cave: 'If you want to better than cats like Oakstar and Bloomheart, then stop.' 'They're off your milk now, they don't need you.'.

Even if her family was divided. Kin was kin. They were the only thing she'd had left. Both her parents were already gone. Her father, Dullface had already his final breathe ripped from him long ago. And Her mother, Tulipfur was condemned to sending the rest of her life in the tiny confines of the Elder's den. They were the only thing she lived for. Even if they didn't want her close. She could still protect them from a distance. From outside threats. And she'd already gotten her paws dirty. So she could do it again.

She looked over to Larchkit. And they could start with that half-blind savage.

Chapter 10

The icy bitter jaws of Leaf-bare had grasped the forest around her, covering every mouse-length in a layer of crisp rock-like frost, from the highest branches of the canopy to deepest darkest burrows of badgers. Trees now hung bare of leaves that once glowed with a healthy green. Now all they'd been reduced to was an another swivelled muddy layer on the forest floor, only existing to be trampled by starving creatures. The tall trunks reminded idle in frozen silence. No chirps of fluttering birds rang. No clicks of hopping insects called. All things of the past. Now the animals of the forest, either cowered in the forgotten cracks or had withered away along with the leaves. All but two.

A lone mother and a single kit. They wondered under the bare claw-branches of the nameless woodland, with no direct destination insight. Fate had not been kind to them. Outcasted from both the Clans and their own family. They're pelt hung loosely against their wiry skeletons.

Once a respected warrior, then the traitorous queen and now murderous rogue, Mapleshade thundered on in her stride, hatred being the only thing allowing her shrivelled heart to pulp the thick red liquid around her husk of a body. Like a useless bird without wings, Larchkit waddled on behind, barely keeping within a fox-length of her. His deep amber eyes constantly flashing in and out of focus. Mid-walking, the kit quickly risked a pause, putting his paws and to his mouth, and lashing a small pink tongue over his paw-pad. That was it. Grumbling to herself, Mapleshade abruptly halted, forcing Larchkit to snap back into focus, having to suddenly halt himself to avoid a painful collision with the pile of bone and fur. A fear scent trickling into her flaring nostrils as the son and mother made direct eye contact.

The massive ragged she-cat stared down the tiny kit with a hardened stony burning glare as he pathetically shrieved. "Larchkit. Stop shaking like a newborn.", she ordered, not holding back on the

harsh tone. Recuntantuily, he forced his body and muscle to tense up, straightening himself up. With that out the way, she held out a front paw, "Show me your paw-pad.", she mewed with more intensely.

However, he didn't lift a muscle. Still staring at her with that stupid expression. "Show me your paw-pad.", she repeated. Resultantly, he placed his tiny paw on hers. She looked down at the redraw paw-pad.

The cracks that ran through his flesh were like long thin gorges that ripped through the rocky ground at Highstones. Split fizzled at the edges of her mouth, like a dog foaming with blood-thirst. The little maggot was fussing over nothing. She'd walk until the ground wore her paws down to the bone itself. She'd walk to the ends of the earth if she needed to, to hunt down any threat to her family. And if she was willing to do that, then Larchkit should've been expected to do the same. The scrawny cat flicked away the tiny paw away from her grasp while she snorted in disgust.

The fur that ran along Larchkit's spine rippled with shame, hesitant to start talking, "Mother.", he breathed, "We've been travelling non-stop all day now. I'm hungry and tired. Can we please stop off for the night?", almost sounding like he begging. Mapleshade's long head leaned in, threateningly, like a snake about to strike. "We don't have that kind attitude around here, kit. Only weaklings think like that.", she scolded, "And what are you?".

Sighing, Larchkit hanging his head low, "The greatest warrior in the Clan's history.", he muttered, his eyes dulling over as if it was being filled with murky water. She nodded, "Exactly. Bloomheart doesn't rest and neither do we.". With that out the way, Mapleshade span on her heel, speeding off again. With Larchkit miserably following.

As she forced herself on through the dead woodland, her mind wandered to how things could've changed so quickly, with no warning. Thinking back even further back to when she was a nursery queen back in that traitorous Clan, it almost didn't feel like her. It felt that tortoiseshell she-cat in her memories; who was neatly groomed, had a full belly and laying in a soft nest of feathers and moss, should have been another cat. Like they were nothing but

false memories.

A time, where she wasn't being rejected by everything and everyone around her. A time where she could freely glide through the Oak forest of Thunderclan, without being fearful of everything flickering shadow and swinging fern. After being rejected by both Thunderclan and Riverclan, She'd thought things couldn't have gotten any worse. But how wrong she was. Less than a moon age, the once happy family had been torn apart, each member travelling their separate path. And now recent times had been torture.

She would prefer to drown in a river, then having to watch her daughter prance around with that loner. Losing any sense of pride from Clan blood that flowed through her veins.

And then there was Patchkit and Appledusk... She'd haven't spoken to either of them since the argument, not even glimpses from a distance. The only thing that reassured her that they were still out there, was the occasional faded scent-mark or scraps of old meals, long past their prime. It was the only spark of hope in this hopeless, leaf-bare straggled wasteland.

Driving the bitter feeling down, she hollowed out her mind. She marched on. The only thing reminding in the lonely void of her mind was the goal. The goal to kill Bloomheart. And once that was done, find a way to rip the last breath from Oakstar's body. Alongside any Thunderclan cat that posed a threat to them. She'd bring down the entire forest if she had to.

She didn't understand what the grey tabby rouge had been doing this past moon. He'd hadn't attacked any of them. Yet. Instead, he just kept moving. Sometimes Mapleshade thought he was playing with her like a disrespectful kit with a piece of prey. Teasing her with the sight of a distant bony tail disappearing behind a corner. Or long narrow claws marks scraped into the bark of a twisting tree. Or- Suddenly, an unmistakable scent hit the glands at the side of her mouth. A scent she knew well. Luckily, Larchkit soon picked it as well. At least he wasn't terrible at tracking. Or this.

Near a thick sheet of thorns, lay several patches of rotting leaves, tinted with blood. The patches created a trail that wrapped behind

the thorns, out of sight. Sticking her muzzle to the ground, she began to follow, Larchkit eagerly letting her take the lead. However, she wouldn't allow such cowardly behaviour, forcing Larchkit at her side with her bush-like tail. Slowly they crept out from under the undergrowth, into a small packed tight clearing. The scent of bloodshed still lingered and the raging sounds of battle still echoed among the nearby pines. A single body was laid out neatly in the centre, as the body of prey on display, but it wasn't the usual kind.

Mapleshade licked her lips as she approached the gruesome scene; A fox cub with a gruesomely mutilated neck. There was no way Bloomheart did this for food, it was to show off. She couldn't help but be reminded of the move he'd taught her as an apprentice. Instead of going for the windpipe like killing bites, it was better to aim for the artery. He always had his own unique way of killing - Making her wonder if she'd unwittingly used the same method on her victims. Larchkit hung back, eyes wide at the viscousness of the scene. If the Fox cub had been a cat, it would probably be around his age. Did Bloomheart do that on purpose?

However, Mapleshade had been too engulfed in her own thoughts as she reminded crouched over the lifeless body, that she had let her guard down. Instead, it had been Larchkit of all cat that sounds out the alarm, "Mum!", he screeched. Snapping back into reality, Mapleshade swung her head back over to the clearing.

And there he sat. His back straight, his tightly pace muscles showing through his thin pelt, tail neatly placed over his paw, chin held high and an eerily calm expression on his face. His right ice blue eye frosty with bitterness. While the after eye reminded clouded in the same storm of blindness. "Greetings Mapleshade. How's Petalkit?", Bloomheart addressed, bowing his head.

"You!", Mapleshade roared out with the loudness of a Lionclan warrior, her lungs threatening to burst. Immediately, exploding into a storm of utter fury and hatred, she flung herself towards the enemy, with the speed of a deer and weight of a boulder. However, as if it'd been planned all along, Bloomheart was already spinning on the spot and flew like a raven into the nearby sea of barren heather. Mapleshade tore after him in a fit of rage. Leaving the

pitiful body of the fox cub and clearing behind. The spiked leaves of the forest clawed and whipped at her face as she sped past. Her jaw hung open, as they severed and darted in and out of the rows of towering pines, prepared, just in cease his lashing tail came into range.

Bloomheart was like a fly, narrowly ducking to the side whenever Mapleshade came too close, avoiding being forced down to the ground. The heartbeat continued to pound in her chest and the blood flowed through her veins, faster and faster. Her paws sliding across the floor. He wasn't a Windclan cat, he couldn't keep this up for much longer!

Anger left her being dragged on by her own body on as Bloomheart slowly began to veer off the obvious path, instead, beginning to make a curving arch in his run, switching course to somewhere off to the east. Using that her advantage, she continued to run straight as he began to turn, closing the distance between them. However, her attempt failed with Bloomheart avoiding her snapping jaws by the skin of his teeth. Yet this made her only more determined. Her mind flashing back to every prey she caught, every warrior she chased out of her territory. She'd been in this station a million times before. Every Time succeeding. This would be no different.

The pine trees around them become even taller and even daunting than ever before. A forest reaching up, torching the cloud-covered sky itself. Bloomheart now just a fox-length ahead of her. He risked a glance over his broad shoulder, accidentally allowing their glare to lock. Neither of them flinching as the chase continued.

A loud booming began to form into a swirling whirlpool of sounds, howling in her ears. A rancid toxic smell drifting over her nose and tongue. Instead of the mushy leaves or sandy soil, it becomes a gritty sticky black stone under her paw pads. How far had she run? Mapleshade halted, breathless. The rage gushing out of her system like the exhausted breaths that escaped her aching throat. The haze of her mind, gathering into more fluid thoughts. Dimly, she looked about herself. She stood on the rough surface of a Thunderpath. And not just any Thunderpath. At the edges of the huge black snake, stood two very distinct territories.

Her heartbeat quicken as she recognized the overly familiar territories, the massive spiked pines of Shadowclan and the strong sturdy oaks of Thunderclan. She stood directly at the border between those two mighty landscapes, both crawling with danger on either side. She stood deep within the land claimed by the four Clans. Trapped. What had she done? How could she have been so stupid?

Instinctually, she dashed over the Shadowclan side as she heard the distance hovering sounds of Monsters as they approached. Being careful, not to step onto the strange green-shards that glinted like ice in the pale sun, the reminds of a piece of two-leg thrash that lay shattered at the side of the Thunderpath. As she crouched down on the dipping slope of Shadowclan's border, the scent marks beginning to pierce at her pink nose. She didn't know what was worse, the scent of Shadowclan or a Thunderpath.

Even worse was the fact, she couldn't see Bloomheart anywhere. The foxheart disappearing somewhere into the Thunderclan side of the border. The odour of the Monsters drowning out any hope of tracking his scent as they thundered past in a massive stampede. She let off a sharp hiss, furious to get the perfect opportunity to rip his throat out, gone. Slipping right passed her paws.

Just then, a loud screeching of a kit made her head raise as a dark brown space moved on the Thunderclan bank. His chest breathed heavy, as he gasped, so exhausted and so desperate for air, it looked as if he was trying to eat it. Larchkit searched frantically for the tortoiseshell rouge, he called his mother. Mapleshade watched him for a moment, blinking. The fact he'd managed to keep up at all, was impressive. Even if it was barely. Maybe this wasn't over. A sudden spark of determination blazed into a raw fire. More fierce than the sun itself.

Another Monster came, a small blue one zipped past her with alarming speed, spending a blast of wind slamming into her face. Waiting briefly, the Tunderpath clear of Monsters and she charged over it, calling out to him, "Larchkit!". His ears pricked at the sound his name, spinning round to see Mapleshade running up to meet him. Relief flooded over him, as he leapt into her paws, purring heavily. "I'd thought I lost you!". He gasped, claws flexing, "And

Bloomheart-", struggling to get control of himself.

However, Mapleshade nudged him off, bending down until she was able to look directly into the black voids of his pupils, her tone serious, "Now's not the time for faffing about, son. This is what all your training and hardships have been for. Now the time has finally come to use it. The cat we've been hunting for is now in our grasp and we won't let him escape. Remember what he did to your sister.".

He looked hesitantly at the floor quickly, but the doubt quickly withered away, replaced by the same fire of determination that blazed inside Mapleshade. This wasn't a desire for revenge, it was the desire to protect those who held any significance to her anymore. The only thing that got her up every morning, in this never-ending leaf-bare session. The only thing that kept her moving through a hollow stomach. The only reason she had to live anymore.

She stared into the gloom of the Thunderclan territory, nose and ears twitching. She didn't care about the threats of patrols anymore. Bloomheart could hide within the depths of the Dark forest itself if he wanted to and that still wouldn't be enough to stop her from finding him. She'd sniff him out like a bloodhound.

As they crept closer to the Thunderclan scent marks, Mapleshade quickly whispered into Larchkit's ear, "Make sure to always keep your distance. And only go for the back legs or tail. Only try to trip him up if you have a good solid opening. I'll deal with the rest.". He nodded, eager for vengeance. Both of their furs rippling like crashing waves on a water's surface and claws unsheltered, to the full-length, ready to tear his throat out. She could already taste his blood at the tip of her tongue. And feel his flesh ripping under her grasp.

Her mouth began to slip open to begin the hunt for her new prey but it wasn't necessary. There, perched on a branch like a hawk, lay Bloomheart, waiting for them, peering down at them like scuttering ants. The same way Oakstar would watch down at his warriors, with that snobby look, from his 'glorious' high rock.

Usually, Mapleshade would question why he was being so mousebrained. But now she didn't care, all she needed him to be was dead. Just as Mapleshade; gripped the edges of the trunk with her thorn-like claw, preparing to scramble up it like a squirrel, Bloomheart's flicked his head over his broad shoulder, took a deep breath and let his mouth hang wide open like a cave entrance. The sound that came out was deafening like a terrified screeching bat. The intensity of it made her freeze up from the shock alone. Even with her ears flat against her head, the massive whaling still seemed to manage to burrow its way in. It echoed through her skull, her head spinning and ringing. Larchkit didn't seem to be having a much better time with his young ears.

It echoed throughout the forest further than any birdsong. Mapleshade's heart sunk to her paws like a stone. Even a deaf cat could have probably heard that from the force of it alone as it split the air itself. So a patrol would have definitely heard it- so they would be coming right here!

"Foxbung!", Mapleshade cursed, aloud, unsheathing her claws from the bark and hurrying towards a confused Larchkit. Moving past him, she flicked her long tail for him to follow. But Larchkit stayed like the stubborn roots of a dandelion, "Why are we running away? You promised this would be the day!", he protested. Turning around mid-run, Mapleshade hurriedly skipped over to him like a panicked deer, "We would be mouse brains not to retreat! Do you want to fight an entire patrol?", she questioned. A heartbeat passed as Larchkit reminded silent.

"Oh, this doesn't matter!", Mapleshade blurted, forcefully grabbing Larchkit by the neck fur and yanking him away from Thunderclan border. Larchkit's yowls of pain filling the air.

Just before she could drag the mottled kit away, Bloomheart launched himself from the branch, landing neatly ahead of them, blocking them in, standing tall, "You're not going anywhere.", he insisted. Dumping the squirming worm onto the gravelly floor, she faced the long-legged cat, staring him down. Teeth chattering with excitement. Genuine nervousness flashed in his pale eyes for a split second as he studied her moves carefully. Clearly remembering their previous encounters. Mapleshade tested her claws by flexing

them against the rock under her paws, now curious of what it would like fighting a half-blind cat. The blindness that she caused no less.

The two cats reminded fixed on each other, standing their ground, reading each other and waiting for the fight to begin. Mapleshade's fur sparked to twice its size. But just then, out of the corner of her eye, a large tabby tom, dashed out of the bushes, landing heavily next to them.

"Nobody move!", the deputy of Thunderclan, Beetail demanded in his usual deep commanding voice. Other warriors quickly joined their deputy's side, emerging from the thick undergrowth, streaming out one by one; Dawnfeather, Nettlepaw, Deerdapple and to the dismay of Mapleshade, Frecklewish. As soon as Frecklewish and Beetail realized it was Mapleshade that stood before them, their face twisted up with hatred. "Mapleshade!", Frecklewish cried, her voice cracking with emotion. However, when Beetail's gaze drifted over to Bloomheart, his eyes soften. But that was nothing compared to the reaction of Bloomheart's own mate and kit; Dawnfeather and Nettlepaw, both of the stunned, completely speechless. Though, Frecklewish didn't seem to care much, still staring at Mapleshade and Larchkit.

"Father! You're alive!", Nettlepaw finally managed to gasp, rushing over. Stemming took a step forward, purring and smiling, as the lost kin reunited, bumping heads. Bitterness gripped the edges of her heart, feeling unexpected jealousy. Cats like Bloomheart didn't deserve a family. Yet, all of the patrols had seemed to have forgotten Mapleshade and Larchkit for a heartbeat, as if they were nothing but thin shadows. All the attention now on Bloomheart. Slowly, Nettlepaw took a step back to allow his parents to finally meet.

The two mates stared at each other lovingly before leaping into each other in a compassionate embrace. They buried their heads into a sea of pelts and purrs. Like a flower blossoming into a mass of brights colours in New-leaf. Around them, Dawndapple and Beetail shifted around uncomfortably. It reminded Mapleshade that Bloomheart was meant to be the replacement Medicine cat. He wasn't even meant to be mates with Dawncloud anymore. How

ironic, Bloomheart was against her being in a Forbidden relationship, yet he's beginning to be in one himself.

Bloomheart drew back from Dawncloud, a shift in his glowing gaze, from loving to bloodlust, "Because I need proof to belong as a warrior, not a Medicine cat. We can still have our future kits, Dawncloud.", he muttered.

Beetail shook his head, "This isn't necessary, Bloomheart. If you come back to Thunderclan, Oakstar can sort out everything.".

Through Bloomheart showed signs of doubt, leaving his mate's side and going up nose to nose with his deputy, "That's where you're wrong. Even if I'm not worthy to be his successor, I won't neglect the dangers Ravenwing predicted. So I've brought those evils, rogues, to be dealt with now.". Suddenly, he swung round to Mapleshade and Larchkit, furiously lashing his tail. Frecklewish crept to his side, eager to join in with what was about to happen next. All the attempt of being brave just fell apart in that heartbeat for Larchkit as he allowed terror to take over. Retreating into the false safety of Mapleshade's side. The patrol was now circling the mother and kits like a group of buzzards swarming around a rotting corpse.

All possible escape routes blocked off. They'd have to fight their way out of the impossible odds of two on six. Surprisingly, Nettlepaw and Deerdapple's faces were tinted with sympathy. Through it was directed at the pitiful lump of kit fur trembling under her paws.

Bloomheart slyly paced round his prisoners, like trapped rodents, for the first time properly smiling, a proud smirk twisting over his lips. He weaved in between his Clanmates as they held their ground, waiting for a signal to attack. The arrogance and overconfidence corrupting the usually humble tom, "I present you, Mapleshade and Larchkit!", he boasted, "Now justice can finally be served.". Bloomheart spotted the hint of reluctance in the uneasy Nettlepaw, so turned to him, "If you don't want to fight, son, fetch Oakstar. He needs to see this for himself.".

Nettlepaw's mentor, Dawndapple's mouth slipped open to protest

but Beetail was already agreeing to Bloomheart's orders like a kit, "Bloomheart right.", he insisted, "Go on, Nettlepaw, quickly!". Still reluctant, he left his worried mother's side and bounded off, the dim shade flooding over his pelt, turning it a pale brown as he returned to the shelter of the forest. With Nettlepaw out the way; claws edged out between toes, the fur becomes ragged and spiked, lips were curled upwards, muscles straining with tension, eyes narrowed to slits, and ears were flat.

For the first time in moons, Mapleshade felt truly helpless. Now she was on nothing but a death wish, with the slightest chance of making it out alive, quickly slipping from her paws with every passing moment.

Now there was one thing left to do, all eyes falling onto Beetail. And he gave the order, with a single nod.

Chapter 11

With no time, she turned, yanked Larchkit to his paws and tried to make a run for it. But it quickly failed, with the first opponent already on them, Beetail himself throwing himself onto Mapleshade's side with the weight of boulder, causing her to be thrust towards the ground and Larchkit being knocked away, both dangerously close to the Thunderpath. All the instincts, training, panic and savagery just took over. Spinning, she gripped Beetail's neck with her forelegs, knocking him away. However, it only caused him to stagger a few paces away. But Mapleshade wasn't given time to even breathe as the next opponent came bolting in, a hate-fill Frecklewish. Oh, this had been something she'd waiting for!

Both cats reared onto their back legs, trading blows. Using her anger to foul her, she flicked away Frecklewish's pathetic swipes before countering with a swipe of her own, her claws easily slicing through Frecklewish's chest fur. Too occupied with the speckled she-cat, Dawnfeather was easily able to come in, tearing through the tip of Mapleshade's ear. The blood gushing out. Hissing out slightly, Mapleshade just barely kept the former Queen back by blinding her with a thick tail, only able to fight one opponent at a time.

Focusing back on Frecklewish, she continued to pound down. However, Frecklewish ignored the pain of Mapleshade's blows, twisting round Mapleshade's outstretched paw, lunging forward like a speeding pike, biting down hard into her neck. Frecklewish's weren't the only fangs inside her, as a now recovered Beetail chomped down deep into her back leg, leaving a painful wound, dragging her down. Dawnfeather was quickly behind him, aiding him with bringing Mapleshade down. A constant need for awareness of the Thunderpath, less than a tail-length away now. The constant roar of speeding monsters pounding in her ears, just as much as the claws ripping through her fur like thin grass.

All while Mapleshade was overwhelmed trying to tussle with the

three warriors, Larchkit was having a battle of his own. Instead of trying to battle two grown cats like a mousebrain, he used his smaller and light build to dodge and weave in-between the constant swipes of Bloomheart and Deerdapple as they struggled to pin him down. Like trying to swat a fly out of mid-air. But Larchkit wouldn't be able to keep it up for long, they needed to get out of here now.

Trying to gather her strength, she kicked out against Beetail's and Dawnfeather's heads, making space for herself. Blinking heavily as blood poured down her head, threatening to blind her. The deep hole in her back leg, draining of blood as well.

In desperation, she sent frantic endless waves of slashes in every direction possible, in an attempt to keep the three warriors at bay. Managing to split Beetail's nose. However, Dawnfeather ducked into Mapleshade's blind spot. Before she could turn round to face her, Mapleshade gasped as Dawnfeather's fangs dug deep into her scruff. Beetail and Frecklewish now lunged on top of her, piling on top of her. Their combined weight overpowering. All she could do was cover her face.

A sudden squeal made Mapleshade's eyes to flick towards Larchkit. Deerdappple had the brown kit pinned by his tail effortlessly with a single paw. He squirmed as the silver warrior hissed in his ear, "Stop struggling before you hurt yourself.", she warned. Yet he didn't, his legs wildly flailing like a fish. Despite how much she wanted to, she couldn't break away from the powerful grip of the three warriors as they kept trying to claw past the paws that covered her head, to the variable face underneath.

Bloomheart kept tightly circling the two cats, but Dawndapple kept her back to him, blocking him from reaching Larchkit under her paws. Mapleshade barely made out Bloomheart's angered words in amongst of the inraged growls of her attackers, "What are you doing?", he demanded, "Let me get to him!". What was he doing? Both Beetail and Dawnfeather seemed to think the same thing, as their attacks ceased as their attention focused on their arguing clanmates. Only Frecklewish didn't seem to care as her mouth hung open to show off fangs as sharp as pine-needles. Her head edged closer to Mapleshade's neck, clearly going for the killing bite, with Mapleshade, still on the floor, barely holding her back.

"No!", Deerdapple countered, "If I let you have him, you'd kill him!".

"That's the entire point!", Bloomheart loudly yowled out, above the racket of monsters, for all ears to hear.

As soon as he said that, Beetail's face twisted in disgust and Dawnfeather mouth opened in a silent gasp. Even Frecklewish stopped in her tracks. Beetail stepped away from Mapleshade, furiously marching up to the lean tom, "What are you talking about?!", he demanded. With only two cats now pinning her down, both distracted, the exhausted Mapleshade made her move. Suddenly, Mapleshade jerked forward, making Dawnfeather lung back in shock while Frecklewish took some force to move. Now free, she didn't even pause for breath, she was imminently on her paws.

Ignoring all the warriors rushing towards her, trying to swarm her, she just focused on Dawndapple and her helpless son in the distance. She ducked under Dawnfeather as she threw herself forward and leapt over Bloomheart charging at her from the side, the two mates colliding, falling into a heap. Luckily, instead of attacking Mapleshade, Beetail runs over to help his winded Clanmates. As Mapleshade reached Deerdapple, Larchkit's eye lit up with faint hope. Quickly she dropped into a hunting crouch, preparing to leap at the warrior.

Surprisingly, Dawndapple withdrew her claws from the kit's tail, releasing him. Immediately, Larchkit flew into his mother's paws, relief flooding over him like waves. "Just remember, if you weren't a nursing queen, I'd kill you myself.", Deerdapple remarked. Resisting the urge to spit in her face, Mapleshade wasted no more time, she looked to the Thunderpath, with the patrol closing in alarmingly fast, swarming them like a hive of bees. The multicoloured monsters stampeded past with such speed, their spaces blur into a stream. Larchkit clung to her paws tightly, shaking. The air shifted behind her as a cat leapt directly from behind her. Now! Without even thinking, Mapleshade just went for broke, grabbing Larchkit awkwardly by the shoulders blades and scripted with what little energy she had.

The earth under her paws turned to humid gravel, as she sped

across the Thunderpath, the muscles in her back leg screaming out in pain. Piercing noises exploded inside her ears, turning them numb. Shutting her eyes as if she was about to lunge into jaws of death's itself, without nothing left to lose, Mapleshade blindly rushed into the incoming waves of Monsters. Yet, somehow, Mapleshade had managed to find the narrowest of gaps between the endless flow of Monsters, freed from the vortex of screeching noises and battering winds. Gasping as her grip on Larchkit loosen before both of them were sent crashing onto the Shadowclan border, getting sand into her eyes and hanging mouth.

There were sharp blasts of pain in her back as Mapleshade skidded across the mossy sloop until eventually slowing to a stop. Getting control again, she attempted to get up on shaky paws, a groaning Larchkit next to her. She glanced over the Thunderclan's border. Surely none of her former Clanmates would be willing to an act as reckless as to that. However, there was a sudden surge of panic when she released there were. Bloomheart and Frecklewish. Both cat's faces twisted with fury and hatred as they sped across the Thunderpath, their eye glittering in the blazing sunlight, making their eyes glow with a fierce orange. Why were those cats so determined to kill them?

Seeing her mate's example, Dawnfeather looked about her, reluctantly following them, leaving the rest of the bewildered patrol behind.

Tearing a muscle or two by forcing herself to her paws too quickly, she nudged Larchkit to stand and began to make her way to the Shadowclan's cover of dim ferns. Rounding up Larchkit like a prisoner, she edged closer to the undergrowth. Just then, Bloomheart's darting head struck out like an adder, snatching Larchkit from Mapleshade's useless grip. "No!", she screamed, viciously tearing after them as Bloomheart ruthlessly dragged the kit away. Although, Dawnfeather was right behind her, latching her jaw around the she-cat's throat, effortlessly flipping Mapleshade over her back. Piling on the pressure onto Mapleshade's throat and exposed stomach, she was soon pinned in place. Her energy already drained and deep wounds still bleeding, made lashing out now impossible. Her legs like twigs, flimsy trying to strike out against

Dawnfeather's belly, only ruffling her long ginger fur, not doing a thing to move her.

Turning her head, she was helpless as Bloomheart aggressively shoved the bundle of fur into Frecklewish's paws, like a scrap of crow-food. "Here.", Bloomheart coldly insisted, "You should have the honour.". The golden she-cat stared blankly at the kit trapped in her grip.

Larchkit's teeth gritted together as he tensed up in pain as she tested him, flexing her whining claws against his spiky brown fur. Larchkit twisted until he faced Bloomheart, who frantically paced around the two cats as he waited for Frecklewish to give the killing blow.

"Y-you tried to kill my sister.", he stuttered.

Frecklewish flinched at this information, staring at Bloomheart. Ignoring her, he leaned directly into Larchkit's face, "I didn't enjoy it but it had to be done. Her destiny is set in stone.", he explained, "Your litter will bring ruin to Thunderclan if you're allowed to grow up. So if you have any honour, just accept your death for everyone's sake.". The claws digging into Mapleshade's skin loosen slightly as Dawnfeather watched the entire scene as well, revulsion tinting her face.

Cats like Frecklewish and Bloomheart were hopeless to reason with. But maybe not every cat left in Thunderclan was a foxheart, maybe there was still some hope. "Dawnfeather.", she harshly whispered, grabbing the she-cat attention. The Thunderclan warrior stared down at her like she was a piece of foxdang, showing her the tips of her teeth. Mapleshade trod carefully with her words, "From one Queen to another.", she began, "If this was Nettlepaw was right now, would you let your mate kill him?".

Her gaze flashed with a sudden coldness like it was flooded over with a sheet of ice. "Of course not!", she growled, offended. Mapleshade had to keep an awareness of Bloomheart and Frecklewish's distant conversion the whole time, knowing Larchkit's life was at their mercy. She needed to convince Dawnfeather quickly.

"Then why should Larchkit be different? He's a kit, for Starclan's sake.", she challenged, getting slightly worked up, "Are you really just going to let Bloomheart and Frecklewish murder him?!". Strangely, instead of Dawnfeather's face flashing with something like shock or alarm, it flashed with shame and guilt, all too aware of her mate's murderous intent.

Bloomheart's irritated voice caught both of their attention, "Think about what his parents did your brother, Frecklewish.", he mewed, leaning over her shoulder like a whispering wind, "Mapleshade used his name and Appledusk killed him. Do you really think this kit can shake that kind of influence?". At those words, Larchkit coiled back into the ground, trying to find a non-existing hiding spot, from the paw that hooved just a tail-length above him, armed and ready for the killing blow. A panicking heartbeat racketed inside Mapleshade's head, Frecklewish couldn't!

Frecklewish's paw stayed in place, before eventually falling to the ground, with a sigh. Bloomheart's eyes widen, his tail lashing, "What you are doing? Kill him!". Slowly, Frecklewish shook her head, clear regret making her hanging tail twitch, "I can't.", she muttered, "Even if this *thing*, isn't a kit, it's still innocent. And I won't go down to their level.".

Then she suddenly swung round to the pinned Mapleshade, "But you on the other hand-".

Before all the words could flow out, Bloomheart snapped, barging past Freckwish, shoving her out the way until he stood directly over the terrified Larchkit, "Then I'll do it myself, traitor!", he bitterly hissed. Frecklewish was sent tumbling onto the Thunderpath, landing into the pile of glittering green shards, her leg painfully scraping over it.

Her back leg was covered in deep scarlet cuts, bleeding badly, now too weak to stand. "My leg!", Frecklewish exclaimed, still laying in the middle of the Thunderpath. The patrol on the Thunderclan side, eyes widen, still too cowardly to cross. "Serves you right. If you ignore Starclan's warnings, it will lead to more tragedies like Flowerpaw and Birchface.", Bloomheart retorted, his back to her. Abruptly, the huge glowing eyes of a Monster appeared in the

distance, charging straight for Frecklewish. Yet, Bloomheart took no notice.

"Bloomheart!", his mate called desperately, "Get Frecklewish out the way!". Yet he still didn't. Instead, he started to lean over, opening his mouth to give the killing bite to a squirming Larchkit, now screaming in terror. "Bloomheart!", Beetail and Deerdapple cried out from the other side of the Thunderpath.

All-time seemed to slow now. Despite all yowling his name, despite the car still careening towards a defenceless Frecklewish, it didn't stop him in his quest to rid the world of half-breeds. Mapleshade looked at a terrified Dawnfeather, who prepared to lunge away from her and go after Frecklewish. A sudden wave of numbness coming over her. If he took Larchkit at this moment, it would only be fair for her to take one of his.

Life for life.

Just as the tips of Bloomheart's snake-like fangs began to dig into the throat of his helpless victim, Mapleshade forced herself, despite all the pain and exhaustion to grasp Dawnfeather's underbelly with her back legs, just before she could leap away. Without a hint of remorse, Mapleshade sent Dawnfeather flying through the air like a hawk, directly in front of the speeding monster, now tail-lengths away from Frecklewish.

They didn't even have time to scream out in pain, as their last breaths were torn from their bodies in less than a heartbeat. Dying in a gruesome explosion of blood and guts. The Thunderpath now stained with thick sticky red rivers. The air itself rippled as it was filled with the; yowls, cries, screams, shouts, wails and howls of the cats around her. The most Satisfying one by far being, Bloomheart's, as he tore away from Larchkit, "Dawnfeather!", his voice cracking like ice shards.

She stood now free. She stared. Taking the brief moment to marvel at her creation, the shattered remains of Frecklewish and Dawnfeather; the cat that had sent her into exile and the mate of her kits' attempted murderer. Now nothing but a mushy pile of shredded bones, skin, pelts, and organs. Revenge was sweet.

Bloomheart stood at the edge of Thunderpath like he was made out of stone, completely frozen; Motionless, Speechless, Emotionless, Useless, Pointless. He continued to stare. Just stare. At what was once his beloved Dawnfeather. The cat he'd had a son with.

Now free, Mapleshade hurriedly limped over to the silent Larchkit, the blood draining from her ear and leg. Past Bloomheart. Her head now light. Together, they rushed into the deep thicket of Shadowclan territory with nowhere else to go, like submerging themselves an endless green lake, filled with predictors to snatch them up.

A quick glance told her, Nettlepaw had returned with Oakstar at his side. Just in time for them to see their dead loved ones.

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Finally, Bloomheart managed to shake himself out of his horrified dazed, his legs still violently and uncontrollable trembling. What had he just watched? First, he had that piece of filth finally in his paws and the next this... Dawnfeather's mutilated body laying out before him, lifeless. In the distance, the Monster, that had taken his beloved mate's life, veered to the side of the Thunderpath. It halted suddenly, with a twoleg tumbling out of the swinging side, flapping its arms wildly, making angry bellowing noises as stared at its blood-drenched monster.

Not caring in the slightest, Bloomheart rushed over to Dawnfeather's side, carefully grabbing her by her mangled scruff, dragging her to safety. Now by his side, he looked into her beautiful ice-blue eyes one last time, now clouded over with the emptiness of death. She wasn't truly dead, was she? It couldn't happen again, not after their kit, Flowerpaw died. As if he expected a Starclan miracle to happen, he prodded at Dawnfeather's flank several times, silently praying for her to wake. Yet, nothing, not even the slight twitch of an ear or tail.

As the reality of his situation come over him, overwhelming anger and guilt sunk into him in an explosion of emotion, coming out as one massive deafening wail. As it faded, Bloomheart slowly wrapped himself around his mate protectively. It was similar to

how they went to sleep every night in their Thunderclan nest. It was warm against her body, but not in the natural the way, instead, the sicky warmth coming from her blood. But he still refused to move, as it dried on his pelt, mattering his fur into clumps.

He buried his head into her thick yet soft ginger fur, quietly whimpering. This wasn't how it was meant to end for her. She was meant to either grow old and die peacefully in her sleep or the glory of battle. A proper battle. Not whatever type of skirmish that turned into. Dying to the claws of that traitor of all cats. Why did Dawnfeather have to fall to Mapleshade? Waves of shames rippled down his spine, clawing the rocky ground. He'd failed again. If he had just managed kill Mapleshade on that border patrol three moons ago, none of this would've happened. He would still have his eye, he would still have his dignitary and he would still have his mate.

And to think that in time not so long ago, he would have considered Mapleshade, an old friend, and respected clanmate. But what did he know about anything? She'd become the worst type of traitor. She let the purest blood in the entire forest become toxic. And toxic blood needed to be wiped from the face of the earth, Starclan demanded of it.

The guilt began to boil up instead of him as his mind wandered to his son, Nettlepaw. He was only an apprentice and already lost his littermate. He shouldn't have to go through this. As those thoughts drifted through his head, new cries filled the air as two new cats emerged from the undergrowth; Oakstar and Nettlepaw. Bloomheart let out a sadden sigh as his distressed son spotted his mother's twisted corpse, crying out louder than the loudest of birds. Oakstar having a similar reaction as he spotted his daughter, furiously pounding down at her corpse-like an enemy warrior, trying to wake her up.

As Oakstar's broad head swung round to Beetail and Deerdapple, yowling his head off in anger, Nettlepaw waited for the Thunderpath to clear before timidly crossing it. Trying to ignore the background racket of Oakstar's fox-like howling, Bloomheart stood a little straighter, as Nettlepaw approached, his eyes unmoving from his mother. Seeing his son suffer like made him like he was

going to split in two, just like Dawnfeather's head. Suddenly Nettlepaw began to wildly swing his head side to side, "This isn't real- This isn't real-", he stuttered.

Bloomheart took a small step towards him, "Nettlepaw.", he mewed, trying to reach out to him.

Suddenly Nettlepaw's snapped his head round to stare his father with those same pale blue eyes as his mother, "This isn't real!", Nettlepaw screeched out from the top of his head. Slowly, he dipped his head, "I'm sorry, son. But it is.", wrapping his blood-covered tail over Nettlepaw's drooping shoulders.

The young apprentice breathing became heavy with panic, he physically started shaking. He swore he could even see the swollen heart beating in Nettlepaw's ginger chest. Trying to deal with the raw emotion, Nettlepaw started to flex his claws against his own face. "Don't do that.", Bloomheart quietly muttered. Netllepaw stopped but it didn't make the pain go away, instead of crumbling to the floor, curling up against Dawnfeather's ripped open belly, miserably sobbing.

For the briefest moment, the blood from Dawnfeather's body was gone, instead lit up with the warm glow of the Nursery. Instead of being a traumatized apprentice, Nettlepaw was a tiny ginger bundle beside his grey sister. The two mates nuzzled each other as they celebrated the gift of a new life. Not the taking of one. At least Dawncloud was united with Flowerpaw in Starclan.

A haunting, eerily, devilish silence hung around the grieving family, like a vile scent that refused to lift. A sudden and unwanted spark of rage come to life inside of him, making him tense up. In past, it's been the half-clan rats was his main focus- But now- Mapleshade had finally done it. Not just a threat to Thunderclan anymore, but to Bloomheart's own family. Was this in Starclan's plan?

He then realize Nettlepaw looking straight at him, "What happened!?", he aggressively demanded, a rare sight of anger from his son. Very rare indeed.

"Mapleshade happened!", he loudly exclaimed, "If it wasn't for her,

your mother would still be alive!". Nettlepaw eyes widen, suddenly speechless. Bloomheart took a step forward, shaking his head, "You'll understand someday.", he mewed, nudging Nettlepaw to the side as he grasped Dawnfeather's body again, trying to get her on his shoulders. "Let's just get her body back for brutal .", Bloomheart mewed. All Nettlepaw could do was nod, as he took hold of her flank, hanging limply as they carried her the edge of the Thunderpath. Several Monsters sped past, the Twoleg in their stomachs, staring at the gathering of cats.

Together, the father and son raced across the black surface, as the singed reminds of a burning wildfire. As they crossed with their precious cargo, Nettlepaw whispered up to Bloomheart, "Dad, you're still going to come back to the Clan, right?". His throat become sandy dry with guilt, Nettlepaw would need him more than ever but he still hadn't made up for his growing pile of failures to Thunderclan. "We'll see.", Bloomheart sighed. The thick trunks of the Thunderclan's oaks now in reach. It would be strange seeing the camp again. And all the reactions of his Clanmates. But did he even deserve that? How could he earn his place back in the Clan now with his blind eye and constant loses to Mapleshade? There was no place in Thunderclan for weaklings.

Soon, they meet up with the rest of the patrol at Thunderclan scent marks, still shaken up. Beetail was the first to approach them with stiff movements, "I can take her if you want to.", the deputy offered.

He politely shook his head, "Thank you for the offer. But with all due respect, she is my mate and I'll be the one to take her home.".

However, despite his warning, Beetail stretched up, plucking Dawnfeather from his back, gently pulling her off. "Hey!", Nettlepaw gasped, rearing up to grab her but missing. "I said no.", Bloomheart repeated, angered.

The way Beetail's deep amber eyes were darkened over with an almost purple tint, shook Bloomheart to his core. As if he'd suffered the worst betrayal in his life, even more then Mapleshade's. Beetail crouched over Dawnfeather's body, keeping them separated. Nettlepaw foolishly bared his teeth as he tried to drag her back, all attempts failing.

A low snarl made Bloomheart turn. Concern tugging at his ribs like vines, almost fearful to face the beast that lay behind him. Fizzing foam dripped from the edges of Oakstar's lips, like a drooling dog, seething. Oakstar stood over Frecklewish's body, fur spiked up and the silver tabby, Dawndapple sitting at his side, her tail laying over her paws.

"You killed my daughter!", Oakstar accused, his voice deep with hatred.

Nettlepaw crept back, lowed to the floor like a scuttering spider, revolted, "You did what?". Bloomheart looked wildly among the faces of his clanmates, horrified that he'd be accused of such a terrible act, "I did no such thing!", he argued.

Somehow still remarkably calm, Dawndapple addressed Bloomheart, still sitting, "Don't lie, foxheart. We saw what you did, you shoved her into the Thunderpath.".

Bloomheart couldn't believe the words that were coming out the grey she-cat's mouth for a second. "Mapleshade's the murderer!", he pointed out like they were all mouse-brained, "She's the one that was trespassing on Thunderclan territory and killing our warriors! She killed my Dawnfeather!". He shrivelled up for a moment, "Dawnfeather- is dead because of her.", the words barely coming out.

Oakstar stormed passed Deerdapple, his long claws extended, coming within a fox-length from him. Bloomheart prepared himself. However the brainless apprentice leapt in between them, swiping at the air, "Stay away from my father!", he warned, trying to sound threatening. Dawndapple quickly moved in, grabbing Nettlepaw by the scruff, guiding her struggling apprentice away. Before Bloomheart could stop Dawndapple, an inraged Oakstar stepped into his path, blocking him, growling. Bloomheart snarled back at him.

"I know what she did. And I can assure you, she'll be hunted down and killed.", Oakstar remarked, "But that doesn't change your crime, Bloomheart. You shoved Frecklewish into the Thunderpath and did nothing to save her when Monster was coming straight for her!".

"I occupied was with Latchkit! If I went save her, I'd need to let a future murderer escape. It was a choice between one life now or dozen in the future." he countered, letting all his beliefs flood out, "Your mistake of keeping those evil spawns alive endangers us all!".

Oakstar stared him down, gormless, "You mean the kits?", he questioned, now standing his ground, a fight threatening to break out at any heartbeat. Nettlepaw helpless to do anything as his mentor pinned him down. "Yes, the kits.", he howled, "Especially the kits! Ravenwing's omen coming true, you blind bat. Warriors are already dead because of your inaction. Killing them is not against the code because they're not meant to exist in the first place. They shouldn't even be allowed to be called cats."

For a brief moment, Oakstar becomes thoughtful and quietly uttered, "From where I see it if those kits become killers - You're the one driving them towards it. Every time you try to kill them, more hate will fester inside them. My only mistake was making you a Medicine cat. It's your duty to be the messager of Starclan, not their infallible enforcer. A single cat shouldn't decide on who lives and die."

Horror gripped Bloomheart's chest, dreading where this was going, "Get to the point already!".

Gritting his teeth together, Oakstar went nose to nose with Bloomheart, his foul rancid breath in Bloomheart's nostrils, "If you're really so dedicated to the Code, you'll follow your leader's orders and get out of here.".

"What?", Bloomheart remarked, confused.

"You may have disappeared beforehand, but this time it's official.", Oakstar declared with a booming voice, "I exile you from Thunderclan for the murder of Frecklewish and the attempted murder of Larchkit! If you're found on my lands again, you'll be killed on sight."

Bloomheart stiffened up. His blood turning to ice and venom. He turned hollow inside. Him? Exiled? Exile was for traitors like Mapleshade, not him!

"Don't blame me for your failings as a leader! If you knew anything, you would know the Warrior code expects you take action against a weak leader.", he reminded Oakstar, "So maybe you should be the one getting exiled.". As soon as the sentence slipped out, Oakstar's massive head lunged forward, grasping Bloomheart's throat, yanking the tom off his paws like a kit and effortlessly hauling him away.

Pain striking against his jaw as he landed awkwardly on the hard gravel floor. He collapsed, his head spinning. "Dad!", he heard his son's words ringing in his ears. This couldn't be happening. He was the one enforcing the Warrior code. Things like this didn't happen to honourable cats like him. He lay there on the ground, numb, heavy panting from the shock.

Slowly, he climbed to his paws, shaking his head to wake up from this nightmare. But he didn't. Still crouched, he lifted his narrow head to see Oakstar standing over him, Beetail now at his side. "Get out!", Oakstar ordered. Both bulky built toms' muscles rippling under their dark pelts, eager for a fight. Their claws out. The claws that would rip through his thin ginger fur like a leaf. Unexpectedly, Bloomheart's body betrayed him, pathetically shaking as fear gripped him. This wasn't him.

Staring into the leader's and deputy's eyes for a while longer, he eventually shuffled back, beginning to turn away. Nettlepaw then launched into an outburst, beginning to flail wildly, "No! You can't do this!", he shouted out. Dawndapple was forced to tighten her grasp on the apprentice, to keep him under control, "I need him!".

However, his son's words meant nothing as Bloomheart crept away down the slope, heading to nowhere. Hopelessness now consuming him. Leaving Nettlepaw and Dawnfeather behind. His expression now blanks as it stared at the floor, emotionless. Why had Starclan allowed this? Letting him lose his mate, son and honour all in one day. How could they let this happen? Surely, they'd realized that he'd given up everything in their grand name? Surely, they could see what he was trying to do? Ridding the world of all the cats that Warrior Code spoke against was an honourable thing, doesn't it? What was wrong with it? Why were they punishing him?

He halted, looking back at the patrol, now nothing but specks, surprised on how far he'd walked already. Bitterness making his blood boil. Was it Mapleshade? Was it his destiny to slay the savage? But to be honest, now, it was much more than destiny or any grander purpose.

He couldn't believe it. It was one thing to be mates with his daughter's murderer - But now Mapleshade killed his mate with her own paws. The same cat he'd trained since she left the Nursery all those moons ago. Now he and Mapleshade were at each other throats at every turn. It destroyed their loved ones during the crossfire.

"How long can this keep going?", the sleek tom uttered as he wandered into exile and a bleak future.

Chapter 12

Larchkit's new surrounding was massive and terrifying. Threatening pine trees towering over the tiny kit, a constant intimidating presence. All sight of the pale sky above, almost completely blocked out, reduced to nothing but blue specks. The only bright colour came from the melting frost, now mushy slush in the midday sun, turning the earth muddy. The pines cast a seemly unnaturally dark layer of shade over the bare damp woodland floor, in a thick black sheet. The eery chatter of mischievous crows echoing throughout the spiked canopy looming above.

Black shapes moved as the crows idly hopped from one branch to other, peering down at them with those large round unblinking eyes. Judging if Larchkit and Mum was a pental meal in this unforgiving season of Leaf-bare. A low growl thumbed in Larchkit's throat. He'd send them all away screeching before they even had the chance to peek out their eyeballs. You didn't past Larchkit, the greatest warrior in all the Clans!

Seeing his badly-bleeding mother limping and having enough, he pressed himself against her flank, "Here, rest on my shoulder.", he suggested with a positive voice. The only response he got was a quiet grunt as she accepted his offer, leaning against him. Ok, that

was quite worrying actually. Mum never accepted his offers of help, saying how it was always weak. It didn't matter now. All he needed was focus on getting out of this creepy place, find a good patch of bushes and rest. A good sleep always worked for him back in the nursery, of the few memories he still had of that place. His mind briefly flashing to Tulipfur. Was she ok there?

However, over time, he becomes quite exhausted. His walking becoming slower and slower as the weight of Mum's weight increased. It was like trying to carry a pile of boulders! But he pressed on, Mum wouldn't give up if this was him and neither would he. Yet, the weight continued to increase as Mum began to completely slump over him. It soon became almost impossible to stand, gasping, "Mother please, try to walk for yourself a bit more, I can't carry all of you.". However, he was then forced to duck away from her collapsing not wanting to be crushed under her.

He rushed to Mum's side, desperately shaking her, "Mother?", he asked, "Get up. We can't sleep here, we need to get out of here.". Yet no response. He shook her again. Yet nothing. Growing frustrated, he climbed to other side of her. Rearing up onto his hind legs, he jabbed down onto Mum's soft exposed belly. This had to get a reaction! Yet, all it did was make Mapleshade twitch a few times before going limp again. Panicked breaths escaped from his mouth.

What did he do? Out of desperation, he turned to the empty space surrounding him, shouting out into the gloom of the strange forest, "Help! Someone, please! My mother- I think she's sick!".

His cries carried one through the trees, echoing for a long time before eventually fading into the lingering silence. "Hello!?", he repeated, "Help me! Anybody!".

Just then his ears pricked as he heard the distant sound of a twig snapping and leaves rustling. A new, foul scent clung to his nose. Worse than the Thunderpath he'd been fighting next to just a few heartbeats ago. Swift shapes darted from one bush to the other, too fast to catch. Like flashing shadows. But they weren't the crows from earlier.

Slowly, Larchkit turned around to see the distant figures of cats

coming out from the darkness. And they weren't friendly. Lean builds, worn down pelts and paced muscles. Their lips were drawn back to show dastardly-looking teeth. Teeth that could some serious damage to him or Mum. He shrunk down into his mother's thick fur, somehow expecting to be hidden from them.

Four cats were now gathered around him, snarling, their eyes gleaming.

The patrol contained to frantically pace around the helpless cats, like crows circling a rotting corpse. They chattered to each other with sharp tongues, but the fear that consumed Larchkit, was so much, their words were only muffled meaningless babble. All he could do was hung onto Mum slightly tighter, burying himself in a mass of long fur like a forest of ginger stems. A large black tabby she-cat with white muzzle stepped forward, the tips of her fangs showing threatening through her lips. She leaned in right into the kit's face, so much, that he could feel her breath on his thin whiskers, "What happened to Mapleshade then?", she slowly mewed, menacingly.

Larchkit gulped, steadying his breathing, trying to get grip of his nerves. If he was going to get out of this unharmed, the last thing he could afford to do was panic. He stiffened up his muscles, getting control of himself, "Att-Attacked by a Thunderclan patrol.", he muttered. At those words, the she-cat drew back, turning to her fellow Shadowclan warriors, beginning to speak among themselves. Every word as clear as freshwater not even trying to hide their conversion.

"She's going to die anyway, so let's just kill her now and get it over with.", a grey mottled tom mumbled. Larchkit's ears pricked and eyes widen. Kill her? Luckily, the she-cat didn't seem to agree, shaking her head, "Ain't you forgetting she has a kit, Swooptalon?", she reminded her clanmate with a harsh tone. Yet Swooptalon just flicked his small head, uninterested, "Just chase him out.". The two warriors at the back muttered their quiet approval.

However the she-cat remained stubborn like a tree against the battering wind, "That's no better than killing it ourselves, it'll die out there without its mother.". Swooptalon was now standing

squarely at his clanmate as if he was facing an energy warrior, his own mortality being questioned. They stare at each other hard in the eyes. Before anything could start, a small tabby tom stood in between them like a log, blocking them. He turned his attention to the black she-cat, "Silknose, unless you can think of alternative, Swooptalon right.". A smug smile came over Silknose's lips, as they'd blindly fallen right into a spider's web, "I can actually.".

The patrol looked blankly at her for aa while before the small tabby's eyes finally narrowed, "You're kidding, right?". Larchkit blinked in confusion, still not understanding. Silknose nodded while sighing, "We haven't got much choice." she pointed out, "Unless you three want the blood of a kit on your paws.". This took all of them off guard, a wave of fear rippling through them, striking them right at the core. But as the bewilderment faded on Swooptalon's face, it was soon replaced by anger, storming up to her, "Don't you dare accuse us of being kit killers! We just don't want to help a foxhearted rouge.". He spans round, flicking his long fluffy tail over Mapleshade's limp body.

He continued, "The only way to keep her alive, is through herbs. Herbs, I remind you, that can be used to save the life of someone who actually deserves it.". After Swooptalon's compelling speech, even Larchkit, for the briefest of moments, agreed with the warrior. Before the realization of Mum being the one they were talking about, came crashing in again. Foxheart and rouge, ringing his small head. Having heard those words used against her, too many times now.

Unlike the rest of the cats, Silknose remained unhinged. Immediately, she barged past him, shoving him aside with broad shoulder and starting to give out orders as if Swooptalon had said nothing at all. She turned to a pale ginger she-cat, "Warmpetal." she instructed, "Run ahead to camp and warn Snakestar and Sloefur they'll be getting some visitors.". With a slight hesitation, the cat known as Warmpetal nodded, dashing off into the distance. In the background, a storm cloud was forming over Swooptalon's head, his lashing tail, causing the layer of dead leaves to scutter. "What, so you're going to completely ignore me now?", he demanded to know.

"I'm the deputy around here, not you. So I'd watch your tongue.", Silknose countered, beginning to approach dangerously close to Larchkit and Mum. He flexed his claws, arming himself if the need arose. Suddenly, Silknose's head snapped forward, grabbing Mum by the neck and beginning to roughly drag her across the muddy forest floor. It happened so quickly, the force caused Larchkit to lose his grip on her flank, tumbling down, landing heavily on a tough bark wall, as he hit a tree root. Getting hold of blurred sense again, he threw his body forward, landing on his mother's slug-like tail. "Let go of her!", he hissed.

Silknose blinked at him for a moment before handing the collapsed Mapleshade over to the two Shadowclan warriors, "Take her.". With a mutter of annoyance and clear disgust, Swooptalon latched his jaw around her scruff while the tabby tom took the back legs. With their combined strength, they easily lifted Mum off the ground slightly, her paws dangling. Then they began marching off with her, to Larchkit's dismay. The panic building up like storm clouds, Larchkit raced forward, ready to fight for his life to save her. Before he could get within a fox-length of them, a swift paw suddenly swept in, grabbing Larchkit by the chest and slamming him into a pile of pine-needles. Freezing up after he realized Silknose stood directly over him, trapping him.

"Do you know anything about herbs, kit?", she asked with a sarcastic dry voice. He blinked up at her, "Why would I?".

"Exactly. So we're the only thing standing between your mother and death. So I suggest you corporate.", she advised, raising her head to the sky, making her look like a giant. Without even needing to look at them, Larchkit could sense the long claws curling into the dirt right next to his head. Her fur was still spiked, eyes glinted hungrily and lips edging up upwards, threatening to form into a snarl. "What makes you any different from the Thunderclan cats?", he muttered suspiciously. The she-cat scoffed, "A lot of things.", she boasted.

Then, she tugged at his short tail like plucking a worm from the earth, roughly pulling him to his paws. Turning away, she rounded him up with her bushy tail, gilding him in the direction of the other warriors, now in the far distance. She looked at him one final time, with a harsh glare, "I'll allow you walk for now.", she warned, "But

try anything and I'll drag you all the way there.". All Larchkit could do, was miserably nod, reluctantly following. His paw pads tingled as they began to veer off to the left, between two large thorn bushes, coiling around like a frozen pile of withered brown snakes. Well, he yowled out for help and he was getting it. He thought. Still unsure of whether he could trust them. Were they any different from the other Clan cats? He just swallowed, hoping he wasn't being led to his death.

As they padded past the towering tree trunks of the pines, he began to run through: every situation, every scenario, every word that could possibly happen. Preparing for the apposite worst. A small smile grew over his mouth, as the sinister plans began to take shape in his mind like bitter frost forming over a tree branch. He wouldn't just get himself out but Mum as well. Nothing would stop him. Not even the most victorious of winds or the fiercest of fires could hold him back.

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As the two warriors lay Mum in a thick clump of moss with Sloefur at the back of the damp cave, grumbling angrily. The walls of the dens were foreboding and long like a hive, as if a massive wasp had carved it. It was dimly lit, covered in a fog of thick gloom, appearing as solid black in the deepest of the creeping cracks. The swallow breeze that managed to burrow its way into the haunting cave, would quicking ware itself out, soon fading into an echoing silence.

Continuing to stare at it, a sense of bread hooved over Larchkit's head like a rotten foul odour. Before he could back up, an overhanging presence of larger cat crept up behind him, his fear too much to check who it was. A boney hard muzzle swept across his spine, knocking him into the unsettling Medicine den. He stumbled, just managing to use his sturdy tail to balance himself again. Glancing around the cave for more detail, he noticed the brown and green piles of various; leaves, roots, and stems, stacked up against the dull grey stone walls. With no clear system of organization.

He swallowed as crept past the scrawny medicine cat crouched

down, chewing up some crispy leaves into a slimy mash. Hopefully, that would be the stuff that saved Mum. A long line of shadows seemed to be streaked across Sloefur's face, hiding his expression but Larchkit didn't need to see his face to know how he was feeling, his neck fur was spiked, the anger scent almost radiating off of him. The beam of dull sunlight that managed to burrow into the narrow cave kept flicking in and out of existence, as Shadowclan cats lingered around the entrance, trying to catch glimpse of strange new cats in their camp.

Some of the cats' eyes glinted with harmless curiosity while others' teeth glinted as they bared their fangs, making Larchkit retreat deeper into the den. Beyond the spying cats, he spotted the freshly caught prey stacked in the centre of the clearing, making his mouth water. He'd do anything to get a meal after him belly had so empty, for so long. Without even realizing he stranger in the wrong direction, hitting a wall of fur and bone. Instinctively, he immediately rolled away, twisting to face his opponent with tail and fur flaring. But his fur flattened as he saw it was only the Medicine cat blinking at him, a pile of herbs at his paws.

"Good reflexes for a kit.", he muttered, "Too good.", his eyes narrowing, tinted with suspension. Though Larchkit's fur wasn't on end anymore, he still stayed in his defensive position, standing his ground, tail swishing, irritated, "Is that meant to be a compliment?". He shrugged half-heartedly while padding over to his only patient, still unconscious, "You take it however you like, but you better cherish it because I won't have anything nice to say after that".

Larchkit shuffled closer to the Medicine cat, a growl threatening to escape his lips, "Why do you hate me?".

Imminently, Sloefur stopped dapping the leaf mash on his mother's deep bite mark on her leg and turned to the kit, scoffing, "I have no reason to hate you, kit.", he then flicked his fluffy black tail over the defenceless cat, "It's her, I hate.". An awkward silence hung over them as Larchkit attempted to process Sloefur's words. "Why?", he muttered.

Sloefur suddenly burst in a fit of amused purring as if it should be obvious, completely dumping his herbs at Mum's side, his full

attention now on Larchkit, "Because the foxheart killed Ravenwing.". It felt a stick had pierced through his heart from the annoyance as if Sloefur had insulted him directly. Why would this stranger know or even care for Ravenwing's murder? "But you're a Shadowclan cat!", he protested, "You shouldn't care what Thunderclan cats do to each other.".

Another fit of laughter came as the argument continued, "If I was a regular warrior then maybe yes, but I'm a Medicine cat, we're beyond petty Clan quarrels over prey or territory. I watched Ravenwing grow from a timid apprentice to a wise Medicine cat. Or that's how it should have been. But your mother cut that short, he was too young to die and now Thunderclan will be crippled for moons without a Medicine cat.". The invisible branch stabbing into his chest, now twisted, cracking Larchkit's heart as the anger surged through, the tips of his fangs being bared, "He deserved it!", he spat bitterly, "He sent us all into exile, Mum was only getting rightful justice!".

Instead of his mouth opening to respond as Larchkit expected, it remained sealed, instead, the emotion coming from his eyes, cold and calculating. He leaned over menacingly, hoving over him like a shadow giant, "Was that really what happened, kit? Was he the one to give the order to send you into exile? Was he cheering as you were dragged out of camp?". Larchkit swallowed, he wasn't to be intimidated. But on a second glance, Sloefur still sent a chilly ice ripple down his back. "N-no.", he blurted without thinking.

Sloefur nodded, "Because he's not that kind of cat. Just remember, it Oakstar who choose to punish you for your parents' foolish actions. No one else is at fault.". Larchkit mind started to cloud up with confusion, "Mum isn't foolish! I-it is his fault- Mum said if he hadn't said anything then none of this would have happened.", he retorted.

"Of course, she would have said that.", he hissed at the open-air disgusted, "If Ravenwing the sole course of this all; then he's the one who betrayed Thunderclan, getting pregnant with a Riverclan cat's kits. Oh, and he must have been the one to lie to you and your littermates about your father being Birchface!", the mockery in his

voice was painfully obvious, even to a kit like Larchkit. He becomes startled by this. But Sloefur didn't stop, containing to challenge him, prodding him in the chest with a boney paw, "So it true then Larchkit? Did Ravenwing do those things?".

The edges of his mouth grew dry as looked down at the cold hard stone floor in shame, "No.", he finally admitted. "Then who was it?", Sloefur muttered in a harsher tone. "Mapleshade.", he mumbled under his breath. Despite his answer being a whisper, Sloefur's muttered ears still managed to pick it up, "Never forget that.", he finally mewed with a sigh, slowly padding away and returning to treating Mum as if nothing had happened. Stretching spider's web between his toes, he began weaving at the edges of the open flesh, slowly sealing each one shut. Clear force in his movements, reluctant to help the cat he hated. Larchkit just watched in silence at the back of the cave, trying to process what he'd just heard. Putting down the last of the white silk, he then began to place the leafy plop onto the sealed wounds.

All Larchkit could do now was settle into the thick moss sheets, burying his head into the green mass as Sloefur carried on working. He pressed himself into the curl of his mother's belly, being drowned in her dropping body heat. He half-expected to feel his littermates press against his dark pelt in a massive bundle like they always use to do. But they didn't. Only thick damp air pressed against him, ruffling his fur like the wind gushing through the brown leaves of a stiff tree branch. Pressing his ears hard against his head and forcing his eye shut, he tried to dream away the harsh reality around him.

Wishing that a spiritual ancestor would come to whisk him into the bright starry seas of Starclan. A soft purr rumbled his throat, as he imagined his groggy pelt shattering into tinted blue sparks, becoming sleek and shining with a million flecks of light. His grandfather, Dullface would be there. He'd heard so much about from the nursery tales, apparently him being a spitting image of him. He'd died saving Mapleshade and Bloomheart from a trespassing loner. In Starclan, Dullface would be a young tom in his prime with massive paced muscles, chestnut dark brown fur, a darker face and paws with a cheesy grin and glinting amber eyes. A

grin edged over Larchkit's own face, Dullface's gift to the world, Mum had once called him. Dullface was now padding towards him with no effect, almost gliding across the shimmering floor, as light as air. Larchkit stretched up higher and higher to greet his lost kin, preparing for the deep emotions.

Energy blazed fiercely in the young kit, suddenly pulsing through his veins. In his excitement, his head thrust up and eyelids shot open, "I want to go to Starclan!", he blurted. Immediately the frosty blue landscapes of Starclan washed away from his vision like water, to be replaced by a familiar cracked rock wall of the den, his daydream shattering. Dread hung over him, realizing it had nothing but a thin fantasy created by a troubled youth. It was just then he noticed Sloefur standing over him, eyes as large as boulders, "What about Starclan?", the black tom asks, concern in his raspy voice. Larchkit attempted to string together a sentence but all that comes out was meaningless silence. "You didn't have a vision from Starclan, did you? What was it? Who was there?", Sloefur insisted, throwing endless waves of questions at him, not letting the kit speak. It would have been nice if he was one of Starclan's chosen cats. But he would be lying to himself and Sloefur if he said yes. Starclan wouldn't want him. He'd heard Bloomheart's ramblings, Starclan hated them. They were stains on the warrior code that needed to scrub away.

Fate forced Larchkit's honesty, "No.", he muttered, "I was only daydreaming.". Sloefur's ears twisted back in irritated, "So what all that about then?", he demanded, putting on a high-pitched voice, " 'I want to go to Starclan'?". His impression was so honestly terrible, it sounded more like a baby mouse then kit. Larchkit fidgeted around in the moss nest, to find a comfortable position, where he wouldn't have to see Sloefur's ugly face anymore. He buried his face deep into the ocean of green mass and dark fur. With a sigh, he admitted, "Because that's where I'd rather be right now.". Surprisingly, he felt a fluffy tail lay across his shoulder, trying to confident him, "If something happening out there, you need to tell me immediately.". Slowly, Larchkit straightened up, turning towards the Medicine cat.

Out of nowhere, two long black shadows were cast over the already dark cave as two large figures stood at the entrance, blocking the arms of the pale sunlight from reaching Larchkit. They slowly approached the helpless mother and kit with a stiff calmness. Instantly he recognized the black tabby she-cat from earlier, Silknose. The black of her pelt mixed with creeping shadows of the cave-like mud and water, to wash away any humanizing figures, only leaving an emotionless void-like creature as dark as the night sky with no stars.

The cat next to her was a stranger, a great hulking tom, with long snake-like legs and striking black stripes, like ripples on a calm lake being whipped by a gentle breeze. But that wasn't the most distributing thing about this cat, something that made Larchkit feel the bile creep up his throat like a spider. One half of his face was larger then other as if it had been crushed in by a sharp rock, the left eye reduced to amber and white mash. His lips and jaw were almost founded over, exposing the raw pink muscle underneath and his teeth in all their glory, long and needle-like, rooted in his gums like weeds. "What's wrong with him?", Larchkit exclaimed to Sloefur quietly, horrified. Hearing those words, the Medicine cats twisted on his heel, cuffing the insensitive kit behind the ear, "Don't be rude.", he snapped, "It's a birth defect.". Larchkit stared up at him blankly, now sitting up, a little startled.

Sloefur padded away hurriedly to greet the black striped tom, with a low respectful bow. Didn't Silknose mention she was the deputy? So if Sloefur was greeting this cat over the deputy, that must mean, he was the leader. The heartbeat pounding hard in his chest, quicken just a little more. Surprised that a cat could lead a whole clan despite his face, it was really impressive. Larchkit straightened up and cleared up his throat, respect instantly sparking for Shadowclan's leader, despite now uttering a word to him yet. "Will she live then?", the leader questioned. Sloefur slowly nodded, "She's in a stable condition now, Snakestar. She could come through quite soon.", he muttered, with clear spite. A frown came over Snakestar's face, "I see.", he mewed with narrowed eyes.

With a nod, Snakestar's one good eye drifted over the darkest corner

of the cave, where Mum and himself lingered. The leader strode over with great distance between each stride, reaching him within less than six steps. "And this is the runt?", he asked, standing over Larchkit like a mountain. flicking his long tail for his deputy to join him. Silknose quickly sped over to join him, to confirm his guess, "Yep, that's the one. Found him screaming like a crow on the border with Mapleshade bloody and unconscious.".

Snakestar settled down next to the moss nest, laying on the bare stone, paws tightly tucked under. "There's a whole Clan out there demanding answers, so I'd like to get them quickly. I can only help you if you tell the truth, understand kit?". His throat became bone dry. What should he say? He couldn't tell this cat everything, could he? He looked over his shoulder to Mum, laying there in dull moss, in a restless sleep. Would she allow it? Snakestar seemed to read his mind, "Don't worry about her, she can't hear you yet. This is just between you and me. So please. What happened to you two?", he instituted.

Larchkit was taken back, this was the first time in many moons he could speak freely without Mum constantly breathing down his neck. Something like this may never happen again with his half-clan heritage. This may be his only chance to ever get help. With a final sigh, he nodded, ready to spill the truth. "I and Mother have been trying to hunt down and kill the Thunderclan cat, Bloomheart for about a moon now.", he explained, the three cats hovering around him, listening in silence, "And earlier, we finally managed to find him. But he must have had it planned out or something because he managed to lure us to the Thunderclan border and we were attacked by a patrol.-".

"Hold on.", Silknose interrupted, "Why Bloomheart? Wasn't he Mapleshade's mentor?". Larchkit shook, the dark memories boiling to the surface, making him feel physically sick. The image of his sister being snatched in Bloomheart's vicious jaws and violently thrashed around, blood going everything, flashing in his mind, consuming his vision for a heartbeat. He tried sucking in the bloated air, desperately trying to control his breathing. At least, now he'd be able to share them, freeing himself from this emotional

confinement Mum had forced him into. "He thinks our Half-Clan status will bring bad omens and is trying to kill us for it. He's already permanently scared Petalkit and just tried to kill me during the patrol attack.".

The small crowd gathered around him, shared disturbed glances. "Charming.", Silknose uttered. Snakestar turned to him with a sudden state of urgency, "Where are your littermates now?", he asked sternly. Larchkit flattened his ears, he could be enough danger himself. He wasn't going to rat out Patchkit and Larchkit to those strangers, so he decided to go vague, "Patchkit is with our father and Petalkit is living with a loner.", he told them, shuffling nervously against Mum's belly. "And why are you all scattered?", Silknose asked, taking a step forward, sniffing at him like a wary rabbit.

"Because Mum tried killed to Dad.", he blurted.

This made Sloefur flinched back in disgust, his anger boiling up, foam fizzing in his mouth as he snarled at Mapleshade as she lay there. "Thanks for making me waste herbs.", he hissed at his deputy. Too prideful to admit her own mistake, she spat back at the grumpy Medicine cat. Larchkit looked among the faces of the surrounding Shadowclan cats confused. Was that really such a shook? Snakestar just shook his head in disappointment, as if he wasn't surprised.

"Anyone else?", Silknose exclaimed with almost crazed eyes, with a tint of mockery. It sounded like she was joking but sadly she was right. "Yes, actually.", he mumbled, "When patrol attacked, Bloomheart shoved Frecklewish into the Thunderpath for refusing to kill me and so Mapleshade did the same to Dawnfeather in retaliation. They were both hit by the same monster.".

Silknose threw her tail into the air in defiance, pacing around the enclosed area, "Of course they did.", Silknose exclaimed even louder, "And cats call us the evil ones.". Even Snakestar seemed taken back this, closing his eyes thoughtfully for a moment. As he opened them again, there had been a shift in his emotions. Suddenly, he started being battered with angry ramblings from both sides, Sloefur stood nose to nose with his leader, tail lashing, "If she's willing to do all that to her own Clanmates. She won't show a

hint of remorse towards us. We need to kill her now or she'll hurt someone for sure!". Before Snakestar could respond, Silknose came in with her own argument, "Get her out of my camp, now!".

Larchkit flung from the nest, baring his teeth, "If you kill her, you'll have to kill me too!", he threatened.

Quickly reacting, Snakestar gathered up his deputy and Medicine cat with his long tail, taking them to the other side of the den, to discuss the matter in private. Larchkit felt helpless in his little corner, shrivelling up into a ball, wishing he hadn't said that. At first, the chatter was too muffled to hear but pricking his ears and focusing like a bat, he finally managed to pick up snippets of the heated conversation, "She's only one cat against an entire camp.", Snakestar pointed out, "She's not stupid enough to attack anyone.". Though Silknose still snorted, unconceived. Snakestar bowed his head, seemly understanding his deputy concerned, "As soon as Sloefur gives the clear, I'll have Mapleshade and Larchkit escorted out immediately .".

Sloefur shuffled nervously as he sat there like a fidgeting kit, too fearful to utter the words. Snakestar flicked his tail, ordering the black cat to speak up. With a slight pause, Sloefur finally muttered, "Larchkit can't go with Mapleshade.". Silknose narrowed her eyes, squishing her face into something ugly, "Why?", she mewed slowly, heavy with suspension. Even Snakestar gazed at Sloefur, confused. So the Medicine cat began to explain, "You've seen the condition Larchkit in.", he mewed, "If she's willing to try and murder her own mate, she could lash out at her kits as well. And she has. Have you seen all those scars on him?".

After Sloefur's words echoed out of existence, Larchkit quickly flinched away from his mother as he released her breathing was beginning to quicken, her eyelid twitching very subtly. He wasn't looking forward to her reaction to finding herself trapped in an enemy camp, for all he knew, it could end up being violent. So for the time being, he decided to keep his distance, pressing himself against the cold wall, trying to focus back on the conversation, it was Silknose speaking now, looking quite irritated, "If it's parents' clans won't take reasonability of it, why should it be ours?", she

retorted.

For once the two cats agreed, Sloefur nodding his head to show his approval, "We should give him to Appledusk or that loner.", he suggested, now facing Snakestar. Unlike his two clanmates, he still seemed doubtful, "But that would require me to send out a patrol for starclan's knows how long, to track down cats that could be literally anywhere.", he pointed out, "In the middle of leadbare.". A mixture of emotions swept through him, he'd loved to see his siblings again, especially Petalkit, whose fear had forced her to hide away behind thick red walls, to protect herself from the likes of Bloomheart.

A hiss threatened to escape like an angry wasp trapped within a spider web. He shouldn't have failed to kill Bloomheart. Now Dawnfeather was dead, forced to take the fall of her mate's crimes. He shivered at the image of Frecklewish and Dawnfeather being crashing under the speeding Monster, their warm blood splashing onto Bloomheart's muzzle, as he tore away from him, utter terror in his eyes. His mind went frosty for a moment, maybe Bloomheart had already been punished enough. Losing his mate- he should understand n never mess with him or Mapleshade again.

Then Silknose's sharps words brought him to the chatter almost forcefully, "Dump it in twoleg guardian then. It can become a kittypet for all I care.". His neck fur rose, over my dead body! But Sloefur quickly came in, almost offended, "No!", he objected, "Twolegs are too unpredictable, one could try to pet and feed you and another could kick and throw stones at you.".

"We can't let it's mother or father have him and we can't let twolegs have it. What are we supposed to do with it, toad-brain?", Silknose mewed, voice raised. Snakestar slowly lifted his head, "What else? We have to take him in.", he mewed calmly. Instantly, Larchkit froze on the spot as if he'd just been turned to stone. Join Shadowclan? His mind went numb, completely unsure of what to think or do. He stared at the three cats and then out onto pine-needle covered camp beyond, with groups of cats flicking past the entrance like streams of pelts. The groups of cats chartered happily among themselves, relaxed.

No constantly strained muscles, constantly feeling on edge and constantly barking orders, like it always was with him and Mum. A thorn of jealousy gripped his heart. If he said yes, this would be his home. Those cats would be his clanmates. And his new kin. Swallowing, he turned to stare at his mother, still so blissfully unaware of what was happening and what could be greeting her when she woke up. Guilt stabbed him in the chest like a sharp stone. But the three cats were still talking in the distance. Reluctantly, he turned away, pricking his hear to catch the last of it.

Silknose held her forepaws to her head, flexing them in annoyance, the debate lost. Surprisingly, she eventually nodded though still with a frosty bitterness glowing in her pale eyes, "If we're going to do this, then it'll need to go back in the nursery, it still technically a kit.". Yet they still continued to disagree, Snaekstar shaking his large head, "There's not much point.", he meowed, "He's almost 6 moons anyway and he's already had training.". Next, it was Sloefur to speak, with an eerie quietness to his words, like fading echoes of the past, "The Clan won't be happy about this.". Silknose shuffled slightly closer to her fellow Shadowclan cat, to say her approval, physically taking his side, "I'm certainly not.", Silknose bluntly and rudely interrupted.

"And I don't expect them to.", Snakestar replied, the tip of tongue edging against the tips of his fangs, slightly nervous, "But with enough time, they'll learn to treat him like any clanmate.". Was Snakestar seriously nervous around his own deputy? He was the leader, for starclan's sake! It should be Silknose shaking in her pelt like a terrified mouse, not the other way around.

She gave a quick glance behind her shoulder, suspension glinting in her eyes, "But he's half-clan. How can we trust him with his loyalty split three ways?".

Though Snaekstar raised his head proudly, "If I could surpass all extractions and become leader, then Larchkit can do the same.", he encouraged, then turning to the black and white she-cat "Some faith in him would also help, Silknose.". His only response was a snort. Larchkit's heart sunk to the floor, realizing what they were about to offer him. "Then it's decided.", Snakestar remarked, twisting on his

heel, finally having that argument out the way. His heartbeat quicken when he released Snakestar was heading straight for him, so acted quickly, twisted until he lay facing the wall, trying not to make it obvious, he had eavesdropped on the entire conversation.

Tightly shutting if he eyes as if asleep, he heard the gentle tapping of paw steps on stone, as the three cats approached him. The air was taken out of him as an alarmingly heavy paw jabbed him in the back, hard, trying to wake him from his fake sleep. Larchkit violently flinched, trying to get away from the paws causing him pain. He predicted to blinking sleepy but that was quickly replaced with a sharp annoyance when he realized it had been Silknose prodding him awake. Had that even been necessary? He held back the urge to snappy at her like one of those annoying tiny yapping dogs. Instead of straightening up as he turned towards Snakestar.

Snakestar meet the kit straight in the eye as if he was staring right into his core, their gaze locked. Larchkit gulped, already knowing every word he was going to say. But he still drained it. Suddenly, Snakestar seemed a lot taller, like a giant Lionclan warrior as a huffed up his chest and held his head high, "Considering you're harsh circumstances, we've decided to offer you a place within Shadowclan.". Larchkit was about to open his mouth to speak, but Silknose was too quick, yanking his opportunity to speak away from him, "Only on the condition, you agree to leave Mapleshade and swear loyalty to us.".

In that heartbeat, his whole world came crashing down. "What?!", he exclaimed, horrid. The three cats around him remained silent, as desperately tried to gather his thoughts. The world around him become blurred, almost spinning as he thought he about to lose his mind. Would he be betraying Mum if he said yes? But- this is what she wanted, surely. For at least one of her kits to grow up safe in the four territories. He could properly fulfil her desire to be the mother of the most powerful warrior in the Clans' history. "Would my littermates be able to join too?", he asked in some vain hope. Silknose narrowed her eyes, "Don't push it, kit. We're not making this offer lightly. We won't offer it again.".

His bleak eyes fell to the bare barren stone floor, his mind drained

off of logical thought, only hollow emotions. Just as he thought the situation couldn't get worse, he heard a shuffle of moss behind him, as Mapleshade steered in her nest, groaning. Before he could even react, Snakestar wrapped his tail around him like a brown snake, leading him away, "We can't do this here, let's take this to my de.n", he gently mewed, like a truly lovely queen to her kit.

Hurriedly Snakestar gave out the orders as Mapleshade began to moan, his voice now sharp as flint, seriousness in his tune, "Sloefur, make sure she doesn't injure herself and Silknose, put some warriors on guard duty in here, quickly.". With question or even hesitation, the clanmates lunged themselves to their ordered duties, Sloefur skipped over to his patient like a fawn while Sloefur barked like a furious fox, shouting out her out orders, echoing throughout the whole massive pine forest. As he was forcefully dragged out into the open air, Larchkit half expected himself to whale out in terror as he was forced away from his mother, sleeping there helplessly, covered in head to tail in deep wounds, only a tooth and claw away from being taken away from him forever. But instead, he felt a strange hollowness, almost trusting the Shadowclan cats as he left them with his mother's fate in their capable paws. And if it eventually comes to Mum making a fool's decision and the Shadowclan cats were forced to slay the beast that was his mother.

Chapter 13

Mapleshade desperately tried twitching every body part she could, trying to gather her strength. She needed to get a grip now! Wake-up you stupid furball! She flexed her long claws, attempting to get a feel for her still unknown surroundings. This moss was bedding, a part of a nest. She hadn't slept on one this comfortable for what felt like an entirety. It was kind of warm in here, if not humid. Like the nursery. Had all those horrible events been nothing but a truly demonic nightmare? But then the awful memories came crashing in again; having everyone turn on her in a heartbeat, betrayed and outcasted from everything she'd known and loved. Then having her own mate and son betray her and having to watch her daughter being slowly corrupted by that filthy kittypet. At least she still had one kit loyal to her every whim.

But then she snapped out of it, astonished at her own stupidity. If she wasn't in the Thunderclan nursery like she'd originally bleakly hoped for, then where was she? She had collapsed. She had been surrounded by trees. They were Tall trees. Pines. Shadowclan-Bloomheart! That fox had taken advantage of her blind hatred as easy as a spider catching a fly in its tangling web. Mapleshade had been swarmed by the patrol like a helpless piece of prey.

However, a low rumble finally brought her from her sleep. Four grown cats surrounded her, sets of razor fangs on display, muscles bulging under their scruffy pelts and claws flexing. Their teeth chattered as if they were staring at fluttering bird, barely straining

themselves from launching themselves at her. It looked as if they wanted to consume her alive like rabid badgers. Unlike the other four, a skinny black tom lay calmly crunched within his little shelter of living shields, a mocking grin on his face. "It's about time you woke up.", he mewed.

Insanity, the impulses of survival surged through her, throwing herself from her welcomed nest, eager to fight for her life. But as soon as her spine become straight, her entire body caved in on itself, betraying her, all her crimes crashing in. Everything seemed to happen at once, things she'd never experienced before or even knew where possible: Exploding flashes of light consumed every corner of her vision, a heavy force strained her heart as if someone was trying to crash it, vomit boiled from the bottom of her raw throat and every drop of blood rushed to her head like fast-flowing rivers. Her legs quickly gave in under her own weight, making her topple over as easy as a baby tree in an unforgiving storm.

Luckily, the soft layer of moss under her took most of the pain away, as she landed awkwardly on the cold floor of the narrow cave, the breath was taken out of her. As she lay, trying to get hold of herself without much success, she heard the gentle patter of paws against stone as Sloefur cautiously approached, "Yeah...I wouldn't recommend that.", he coldly joked. Her nostrils strained as his rancid Shadowclan scent hung over her like smog. Mapleshade flinched as his narrow muzzle began to ruffle through her thick pelt, checking the wounds that covered her entire body. Her pelt was clumpy and sticky, still drenched in dried blood and herb mash, only held together by thin silk. She wanted to force the words out, don't touch me, but her aching throat refused to form the words, only her exhausted gasps coming out.

"Why have you brought me here?", she finally to demand weakly, in a rasping and cracking voice.

Sloefur's muzzle went away from the orange ocean of her fur, Mapleshade imagined him blinking at her, "Believe me, I have no idea. If I'd found you, I'd left you to die like the piece of trash you are.", he growled angrily. Fighting her own body, she twisted until she could see Sloefur, sitting over her, "Trash?!", she spat at his

paws, The Warriors lingering around the gloomy den, slowly crept closer like thin shadows. No words were needed, their faces said it all. *You lay a claw on our Medicine cat and we tear you to screeds without mercy*. Slowly Sloefur sunk into her face immediately until they were touching noses, Mapleshade questioning if he was really a gentle Medicine cat, "Yes, trash, Mapleshade. We know what's you're done, killed Ravenwing and just added Dawnfeather to the list. Oh and not forgetting you almost murdered your mate in front of your kits!", he hissed in her face like a snake spitting venom, his back fur spiked, getting himself overworked.

One of his clanmates, a tabby tom named Prickleleaf, approached the Medicine cat, rapping his spiky tail over his shoulders, "Sloefur, is Mapleshade in a stable condition?". He just swallowed, "As long as she doesn't make any sudden movements, the herbs should take effect." he admitted. Prickleleaf slowly nodded, "Then we handle things from here, it's best if you were somewhere else.". Like a gullible kit being sent away by a grumpy elder, Sloefur hurriedly staggered out the cave, his eyes blazing with hatred on his way out, his pelt turning a pale grey as the sunlight swept over him. Understanding crept into Mapleshade, knowing that Starclan's cruel omens had twisted Sloefur's fate, forcing him into the forever lonely role of a Medicine cat. Because of that, the only he could do was pretend he had a family, projecting his pathetic need to be a father onto Ravenwing. To him, Mapleshade might as well of kill his son. But despite her understanding his pain, she didn't pity it, she'd lost than any of those spoiled Clan brats.

Now she was left alone with four very angry looking warriors, barely holding themselves back from tearing her apart. Resultantly, Pricklenose raised his tail, signalling for them to keep their distance. Each of them pressed themselves against the far walls, motionless like hawks, never letting their prey out of their sight. Mapleshade shuffled in her nest nervously, peering out into the Shadowclan camp as fellow clanmates went about their business, purring, gossiping and sharing tongues. It sickened her. Those were meant to be the most powerful and feared wild cats around but here they were, acting like happy-go-lucky kits. Where was the discipline, the control? It baffled her on how the Clans were even

able to function, let alone survive. You wouldn't catch Larchkit behaving like that.

Speaking of Larchkit, in the far distance, near the base of the tall standing boulder, her son waddled along behind the Shadowclan leader, Snakestar of all cats, like a duckling struggling to keep after it's a mother. Scraps on moss-tangled around her claws as she kneaded the nest, stressed. What had the Shadowclan scum been doing with her son? A variety of reactions came from the Clan cats as they passed the dark brown kit, some muttered harsh words to their friends, others gave him cold glares while other pretended he was no more than thin air. Seeing they were about to enter the cave, Mapleshade sucked in as much frosty air as possible, trying to fill her lungs, gathering her strength. With a slight hesitation, she heaved her into a sitting position, fighting her body that felt like the weight of a mountain. She tried her best to ignore the blood rushing to her ears, causing an annoying ringing, her head arching.

Two of the bodyguards separated to let Snakestar and Larchkit through into the shelter of the Medicine Den. Mapleshade expected Larchkit to throw himself into her paws, relieved to his mother was alright. However, confusion and irritation washed over her when Larchkit stayed firmly in place, his tail and head drooping. His amber eyes were clouded over with unreadable emotions as if he did the worst crime imaginable. The mother and son stared at each other blankly for eerily long, like time itself was losing the motivation to tick on. It was Snakestar who broke the silence, clearly not happy to see her, "You should extremely grateful my deputy to pity your kit, Mapleshade. He's the only the reason you're alive right now.".

Mapleshade was tempted to make a rude remark, but seeing the aggression in the warriors' faces and just wanting to leave as soon as possible, Mapleshade just decided to play it polite for now. She bowed her head with fake respect, "Thank you, for your hostility. But I'm sure I and my son have caused you enough trouble for one day. So we'll get out of your way and leave immediately.". Snakestar's throat tumbled in a chuckle, his unturned lips edging up into a sad smile. Her ears strained against her head and tail bushed up, feeling a stab of annoyance. Why was he looking at her like

that? Like some dedicated elder slowly losing the sharpness of their mind. She didn't need his useless sympathy. "You'll be the only one leaving, Mapleshade.", he calmly informed her, puffing up his chest and raising his chin high. A cold numbness swept over her, as if a harsh leaf-bare wind that tunnelled into her mind, freezing it. "What?", she gasped, trying to take a step forward, but just then, the heaviness and pain quickly set in, forcing her to retreat. Being bond to the tight green circle of her nest. She hated this, this hopeless feeling of helplessness, knowing she could tear apart on the spot if she was just whisker out of place. She was stronger than this.

"From everything I've heard, it's clear that you're not fit to raise a kit. So he'll be staying with us.", Snakestar huffed, his pale eyes staring right at her as sharp as a thorn. She couldn't question the words that were coming out of his twisted mouth for a heartbeat. He's was a Shadowclan cat and she was a Thunderclan exile, they shouldn't care less about what the other did. "How I raise my children is my business and I mine alone.", she informed him, straining her tail so it wouldn't lash from side to side, "You have no right to get involved, Clan cat. I am his mother, if anyone going to raise him, it'll be me. So *Both* of us will be leaving.".

The tips of his fangs were bared, clearly not buying her argument, "Even if your two other kits ran away from you because you tried to kill their father?".

It felt like a massive oak tree had crushed her. How could he possibly know that? The muscles around her thin bones tightened, the cracks in her calm persona slowly forming, her true colours of deep reds leaking through, struggling not to lash out and seal her fate. The place her fight with Appledusk happened was far beyond the realms of the Clans cats. There was no reason a Clan cat should've of witnessed it. The only cats who would reasonably know about it...

Her broad head swung round directly to her son, "Larchkit, how much have you told them?", she demanded, hissing. Larchkit flinched back, Snakestar instantly in front of him, protecting him, "He's told us enough-".

But Mapleshade interrupted him, her patience being taken to its

limits, "Shut up! Larchkit is going to answer this, no one else.".

Still refusing to meet her fierce gaze, Larchkit stared down at the cold floor instead, "I'm sorry, I just couldn't hold in anymore.", he mumbled quietly. Who was the cowardly mangy scrap in front of her, who wouldn't even meet her gaze? This wasn't the Larchkit she'd tirelessly trained day and night for the past moon. The son she knew was so much stronger and confidence than this. He'd been the only one of his littermates wise enough to stay loyal to her. He was dedicated enough to take the harsh yet necessarily journey to become the grand warriors they'd always be destined to be. But this thing was just puny mouse in a cat's skin. Some miserable excuse for a warrior he was. Angrily, she faced Snakestar, "What have you done to my son?! You forced him to tell you-".

Before she could even utter the full sentence, Larchkit was on his paws, a sudden spark on anger in him like her own bursts of rages, shoving past Snakestar's leg until he only stood a rabbit hop away from her resting place, "They didn't force me to do anything, I choose to tell them. I'm not going to stay silent anymore, Mother.". Her eyes widen to the size of rounded pebbles, shocked that this kit, discipline embedded into his very being, would even think would speak out against her, let alone actually do it. He carried on, "I hate the way we live now, just walking and training, walking and training- I haven't eaten in two days but you don't care! We don't even sleep in the same nest anymore.", he growled, letting all the pain that been building in him for the past moon flood out like a gushing waterfall.

"You have learnt nothing!", she exclaimed, jabbing hard him in the chest, "All this is necessary. Do you want to be weak? Don't you want to average your sister after Bloomheart almost killed her?". Staggering back from the blow, he grinding his claws into rock, stubbornly unmoving,

"But she's already averaged, isn't she? You killed Bloomheart's mate, isn't that enough?". She couldn't help but burst into a fit of amused purring, not caring anymore if he hurt his feelings. This child's skull was thicker than a boulder! Clearly, some tough guidance was needed to stop him from wavering off the right path.

"It'll never enough until he's dead himself.", she stated, shaking her head disappointed. For a long time, Larchkit didn't speak, a ripple of shame and confusion sweeping through his pelt like waves on a rocky shore. Outside Mapelshade just gave him a cold expression, but on the inside, she was grinning to herself. *That's right you little worm, finally, you understand, I'm the mother and you're just the silly little kit. You're incapable of making any good decisions.*

Yet, Larchkit still refused to back down, sending another wave of questions at her, "I don't understand. You were constantly going on about joining Shadowclan or Windclan and it's actually happening, your dreams coming reality. One of your kits will be raised in the Clans, shouldn't you be happy?".

Great Starclan, she never realized how naive he truly was, "That was from a time where I was foolish and blind. But after being exiled, I finally saw what the Clans truly were.", she explained. The Shadowclan cats were starting to get restless and muttered between themselves, even the calm Snakestar watched her through narrowed eyes. What she was about to say was going to be offensive but she didn't care, they needed to hear this and just maybe their kit-like illusions could finally be broke, "The other Clan cats have lost sight on what it truly means to be a warrior. They're brought down by the burden of borders and caring for weaklings, but we're free from that. Unlike others, we can actually reach our full potential and protect them from outside threats before they even act.", her speech echoing in the small chamber, her head held, imagining the stone slab ceiling melted away, to be replaced by the brightly lit night sky, thousands of Starclan warrior gazing proudly down at her. "She's really lost it.", one of the snake-hearts whiskered behind her, foolishly thinking it was pulling on deaf ears. Aggressively, She whipped around, her back arched, "Who said that?!", she yelled, facing two young rebellious warriors, barely more than apprentices.

Sharp claws edged out, strapping against the stone, probably trying to get feel for when they scrapped against her skull instead. She bared her fangs, eager for the chance to tear their fur off, even if it meant death. Surprisingly, Snakestar flicked his overly long tail, causing to the bodyguards to sneak back into their own little dark corners. "Don't ruin this for Larchkit, Mapleshade.", he growled, "We

can give him a life that you'll never be able to.". Mapleshade opened her mouth to protest, however, Larchkit was determined that his voice would be heard in the endless waves of arguments being thrown around, "No!", he snapped at her like a bad tempted fox, "I'm not going to spend the rest of my life being dragged along with your killing spree. I actually have the chance to grow up having a normal life and you'd be darn right to think I'll take it!". Mapleshade was utterly speechless. With a sigh, he turned his back on her, padding away to the light-filled entrance, "My decision already made up.", he muttered, "I'm joining Shadowclan.". Hopelessly, Mapleshade outstretched a paw, somehow expecting to reach out to him but it was already too late, he'd stepped into a dim green clearing, which would soon become his new home.

Her heart was now in her throat, wanting to just vomit the disgusting and worthless lump of muscle out. She shriveled into herself like a rotting berry, her organs twisting around themselves like a patch of thorns. In fact, her whole insides felt like they had been replaced by claws, tearing at her skin shell, a wild beast desperate to become released. Hanging her head so low, the tip of her muzzle almost touched the ground, she began chucking to herself, crazed. Of course, this would happen. What was she expecting? She shouldn't have been the slightest bit surprised. If Patchkit and Petalkit would betray her, what made Larchkit any different? Everyone and everything imaginable was now against her, even the world itself. The final lesson exile had taught her, the trust of anything, even your own kin, would only lead to your demise. Would Tulipfur do the same thing if she was standing here right now, instead of stuffed inside the elder's den?

Tearing apart the moss with her claw as if it was a green pelt of another victim, with one final great effort, she forced down the raging storm of nightmares, that was slowly leaking into the voice in her head. She'd wanted this. She'd constantly told Larchkit and his siblings that if they were had the chance to return to their rightful among the clans, take it, no matter who they abandoned. So if she was the one that had caused this, why did she still so betrayed? As her mind grew blank as the frost of confusion formed over it, she felted a muzzle jabbing at her jabbed ribs, sticking out

of an extremely thin flank. "Move!", Pricklenose commanded, now headbutting her hard in the back, taking the air out of her, in an effect to get her out of the nest. Before she could do anything, she was forced to stagger to the entrance, the four warriors swarming around her as quickly as flies to find a corpse, rounding her up as their prisoner. New ripples of pain rushed through her body like her uneven heartbeat, still failing to properly pump the blood flow around her frail body, gathering in her head and making her ears ring as if a lion was roaring directly into them.

As they exited the swirling darkness of the cave, her sore eyes strained against the fierce sunlight as the glowing eyeball sent a sharp beam of light at her, briefly blinding her. Not holding back despite her being injured, the Shadowclan patrol marched her into the clearing, almost proud of themselves. Basically parading her around for everyone to catch a glimpse of their humiliated captive, for them just to marvel at Shadowclan's false victory. A large number of cats gathered around, male and female, young and old, all stared at her through the cracks of the fleshly wall tightly wrapped around her, boxing her inside. No matter when she looked and did, she couldn't escape the mocking faces or harsh unforgiving insults. Eventually, she forced her down in shame, just vaguely hoping for this nightmare to be over. A cold emptiness for the only thing she felt in that moment, too exhausted to feel any burning fury or painful sorrow. Just let me leave, she silently begged, wanting to whale it out on the top of her fragile lungs.

Abruptly, Snakestar weaved his way through his warriors, until he stood squarely at her. As the patrol shuffled round to let their leader though, she caught a glimpse of Larchkit, crouched near the base of some jagged stones like teeth, that reminded her of the ones at high stones. Blanky, he stared into the large empty void of the sky, not even acknowledging her existence, causing another stab of emotional pain. Slowly, Mapleshade turns her head to Snakestar, staring each other down, "You have the finest kit in the forest.", She declared proudly, "You have massive reasonability on your paws, don't to muck it up. You'd better train him well.".

He dipped his head like a swan's long neck disappearing under the

surface of a calm lake, "I intend to.", he assured her, "He'll be trained to by the same high standards as any of our warriors.". Looking at him hard, she tried scanning for any tint of decision, any sign that she was lying to her, just to get her out the way. Though, all she found was an honest cat. She swallowed, her throat going dry, "Good.", she mewed quietly, her lip twitching upwards, "Because I'll be watching.", she warned him, her tail gently swaging like a hanging brunch in the wind.

Yet, Snakestar just shook his head, "No, you won't.", he informed her, "My warriors have my permission to kill you if you step foot over our borders again. This is will be the last time you see Larchkit, so say your goodbyes and leave.". The last time? The words rang meanless in her head, like the echoes in a cave, not able to grasp the harsh reality being laid before her. She'd never see him, the kit she'd had to drag around in her stomach for two moons. The kit she'd been exiled for. And the kit she killed to protect and relentlessly trained to take on the burden on becoming a killer himself. Snakestar waved his skinny tail, making Larchkit: lift his head lazily from his paws, reluctantly shuffling till he stood and wandered over.

"Make sure you train like you've trained before.", she told her last loyal kit, "I want a son I can be proud of.". Larchkit didn't even bother to look her in the eye as they spent their last final moments together as mother and son, "I will.", Larchkit muttered quietly. Why was he making this so difficult? She leaned forward, until her jaw was up against his ear, "If you feel like they're letting you slip into weakness, even slightly, you come back to me immediately.", she whispered to in a harsh tone, so quiet that none of the foxhearts around them gave the subtlest of reactions, "Understand?". A study pressed against her face, as Larchkit shooed her away, giving himself space. He half-heartedly shrugged, "Sure...", he muttered as if he didn't care in the slightest. The air inside her lungs turned to ice, making it impossible to breathe for a heartbeat. If he wasn't going to ever see her again, couldn't he at least be honest? He'd have nothing to lose by this point.

Neither of them moved. Finally, with glazed over eyes, Larchkit

span on his heel, hurriedly disappearing into the safety of the crowd, his traditional Thunderclan and rogue scent was completely overpowered by the piney scent of Shadowclan scent, washing it away. If he mingled among them for too long, he could lose his unique identity forever, to be replaced the foul-smelling Shadowclan scent, no better than foxbung. "Please come back to me.", she muttered under her breath but no one heard.

With Larchkit out the way, there was no reason for Shadowclan to keep this dangerous foxheart within their walls, especially with kits and elders to protect. So slowly, the Shadowclan cat grew impatient, beginning to voice their demands, "Make her leave already!", Warmpetal howled like a wolf, from the far side of camp, near the Apprentice's den. She had her fluffy pale tail wrapped around a tiny cat, no more than a kit, her teeth gleaming with a healthy white and prepared to use them. A speckled she-cat in the front lines of the circle yowled out her agreement, "Before she kills our kits!". Mapleshade's almost red eyes flickered towards the Nursery, seeing small heads popping out of the entrance, their curious noses, and ears twitching like baby rabbits, before being rounded up by paranoid Queens, quickly shoving them back into the safety of their den. Envy grew in her, seeing Queens once like herself, protecting ones so young.

After hearing their two clanmates, more began to join in, Elders' croaky voices whaled out and apprentice's high pitched voice squealing like mouses. Many phrases were thrown around until eventually, the crowd settled one, they began to chant in unison, despite so many different voices, it sounded like the same creature, it was almost captivating, "Get her out, Get her out, Get her out-", they continued, slowly closing in all around her, in all directions, like a swirling vortex of shadows. Snakestar, who had now bounded up to sit on his rightful place on the high stone, watched calmly from above, as the chaos unfounded be. Yet he wasn't the one to give the final order, instead, it was his deputy, a massive black she-cat, nodding her large head towards the entrance and Mapleshade's permanent separation from her last child, "Pricklenose, you and your patrol, escort this rogue off our territory. And if necessary, *end her*.".

With those final words, the patrol tightened their grip of their prisoner, feeling like they were trying to crush her and slowly started dragged forward, into the gloomy green tunnel, into the strange lands that lay beyond.

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Larchkit had been staring at the same grains of sands for what felt like entity, trying to forget his mother's terror-filled face as she violently dragged away, possibly for the last time if she snapped and lost her temper with the patrol. He deeply hoped that wouldn't be the case. Though, honestly, he wouldn't have been surprised if the patrol come back without a scratch on them and their pelt were clean of her dark blood. But he couldn't remain, withered up in a corner all day, pretending he was somewhere else. Before long, Snakestar's loud booming voice, forced him from his little corner, "Larchkit step forward please.", he instructed the young tom. Keeping himself close to the floor as if he was hunting, he reluctantly entered the centre of the clearing, it's sides paced with huge numbers of Shadowclan cats, dozens of them. How could so many cats fit into such a tight space? It felt like he was shrunken down and had fallen into a sandy fit full of raging fiery red ants. As he settled down at the foot of a pile of boulders, directly below the mighty leader, he flattened his ears, trying to block out the questioning whispers coming around like gathering storm clouds.

The once-massive clearing, somehow felt so much tinier. Despite the dull plants and cat's placements being set in stone, they still seemed to melt inwards, towards him, closing and trapping him within. Claustrophobia overpowering his sense beyond loyal and reason. He swallowed, he needed to get a grip. Barely noticing that Snakestar started to address his Clan, standing tall, "Earlier today, Silknose and her patrol found Mapleshade collapsed on our borders after being attacked by Thunderclan, Larchkit with her.", he explained, "Originally, we were going to send them on their way again but after hearing Larchkit's story, it's clear he's not safe being raised by a Foxheart. His littermates have already run away from

her after she tried to kill their father, Appledusk, right in front of them.".

Though Snakestar's speech rang hollow in Larchkit's head, not being able to burrow and make an impact. A mix of horrid gasps, angered growls and cold murmurs, rippled through the Clan, Snakestar waiting patiently for silence to settle in again. He carried on, "I know you all must have mixed feelings about letting a half-clan kit join our ranks but I assure you, it will not be a sign of weakness but instead, a sign of strength!", he proclaimed, serval yowled their approval while others were left to be convinced, "It shows we're not scared to take on vulnerable kits just because of the possible threats. It shows we have a hostility that the other fox-hearted Clans don't. We uphold the Warrior Code in a time where more and more of our Clan brethren are slipping from their lives driven by honour into the chaotic lives of rogues.". Just really got the Clan going, their leader enforcing every Clan's belief of them being the superior from those around them. Building up his courage, he sat up straight, searching through the endless rows of strange faces. Those were going to be his Clanmates, he was going to be confined with them for the rest of his life, he couldn't be scared of them. He'd prove to them ten times over why he was destined to be the finest warrior in the Clan's history. Letting him in, won't be a mistake for them, it would be a miracle.

Puffing up his chest proudly as directly face his new leader as Snakestar's attention finally turned to him. "Larchkit, you wish to join our Clan as an apprentice. Do you promise to upon the Warrior Code and put your loyalty to Shadowclan overall?". But then all that confidence faded away as quickly as it came, with Snakestar's pale brown coat suddenly looking much darker, with blazing ambers to replace his one good olive green one. Shadowclan and Thunderclan's scent suddenly indistinguishable. The towering pines creating seas of a canopy above, now much shorter and stumpier, Oak trees. His heartbeat quicken, pounding in his chest so hard, it rattled his bones. He shook his head desperately trying to rid his mind of the vivid memories flashing in his mind. No, that was a different time and place. This isn't the same, he's being welcomed into a Clan, not outcasted from one. His stomach curled his own birth Clan, pining for his old home. Meanwhile, the time and

awkward silence began to drag on, the whole of Shadowclan staring at him. Hurried, he snapped out of it, "I-I do.", he remarked, forcing out every unnatural word.

Snakestar gazed down at him, a tint of doubt. Larchkit flinched. He wasn't rethinking his decision, was he? Luckily, he nodded but concerningly he hesitated while doing it. Casually, he continued to resight the famous words, as if he said it over a million times, almost sounding bored of it, "Now, by the power invested in me by Starclan, I, Snakestar, leader of Shadowclan, grant you, your new name. From now on, until you have earned your warrior name, you'll be known as Larchpaw. Train hard and fight well. You're greatly privileged to be trained within the greatest of all the Clans.", he boosted, feeding Shadowclan's over-bloated ego, even more, the background being filled cheering once again.

Out of nowhere, Snakestar abruptly twisted on his spot on the towering boulder, for some reason now facing his deputy, who sat just a few rabbit-lengths below him. "Silknose.", he acknowledged, nodding down to her respectful, her nodding back in response, "It's your hostility that's allowed Larchpaw to escape the clutches of his mother and it's only fair, that you be the one to help Larchpaw escape his rogue life and grow into a true warrior. I have no doubt, you'll train him with the same tenacity as you did Splateheart and Grazepaw.".

To this, there was a massive outburst, racketing the trees themselves. Some elder in the back even yowled, "Our deputy deserves better than a half-clan cat!", his voice cracking violently as if he hadn't used it so loudly in moons. Larchpaw buried his head into his chest, trying to hide, distorted his very presence had caused such an uproar. To Larchpaw's shock, Snakestar just remained sitting with relaxed shoulders, lashing a tongue over a paw and wiping it over his twisted face, not giving a foxbung. His deputy displayed a similar attitude, completely ignoring her clanmates that appeared to be one the verge of rioting, "I will.", she mewed, stumblings down the steep rock face to greet Larchpaw. Leniently, she strolled up to her new apprentice without a care in the world, placing her large wet black nose onto his pink mouse-like one. "Hello, furball.", she blinked at him, a sly grin on her face.

"Hello...", Larchpaw could only mumble back, gulping.

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Crashing splashes caused Patchkit to sleepily raise his head from the smooth sun-heated stone and gazed to the wide River stretching out before him, steep rocky shores at its edges. Large barrels of water were set spraying high into the air as his father burst from the water's surface, wildly flailing, too much bubbling foam to get a clear view on what in the name of Starclan he was wrestling with. If Patchkit didn't know any better, he assumed he was fighting with an invisible cat. Just then, he caught a flash of shimmering pale brown scales. Before, he could observe it closer, Appledusk was dragged back down into the torrents of the fast-flowing river, his cream pelt disappearing into the murk. Blinking, Patchkit settled his head back into paws, trying to ignore the overly dramatic sense just happening a few fox-lengths away. Honestly, it was a shame they hadn't figured out this sooner, Riverclan hogged the manger rivers and streams of the area. But their territory couldn't go on forever, so: simply go upstream on one of the good fishing rivers until they weren't on Riverclan territory anymore and you got all the benefits from it and lack the pesty patrols, that use to constantly bug them. Though, admittedly the gorge river this far up north had rather stronger and possibly dangerous currents but it was better than nothing.

The warm sunhigh light turned the kit's pelt into a tint of gold, a purr rumbling in his throat. Not overly excited about Appledusk catching another fish for their meal for the day. Not like he disliked their salty taste, they definitely had their charm, but it did wear on you after awhile, when it literally all you had, day after day. Maybe he was being a little ungrateful, considering cats were starving at this time, at the peak of leaf-bare. Yet, Patchkit couldn't define to himself, he'd do anything to just get a juicy bite of the classic mouse again. Or vole, bit scrawny, but their meat was especially tender. Slightly annoyed now that Appledusk had refused to learn to hunt on land from Mother before everything went downhill. His whiskers twitched. Well, he had just as much Thunderclan blood flowing through his veins as he did Riverclan, he was sure he could teach

himself, eventually.

Annoyingly, a sudden jet of water was sent toward him as Appledusk entered the swallows, heavy drops drenched him as he peacefully lay there. Patchkit squeaked as his nice dry fur was washed over with muddy water coming down like rain, leaping to his paws.

"Dad!", Patchkit squeaked, quickly shaking himself down as Appledusk trudged through the last of the water, a large dull pike locked in his jaws, violently flapping, still alive. He was absolutely soaked to the bone, leaving a watery trail behind him as he climbed onto the dry land. After living with his father so long, Patchkit's questions about why Riverclan cats never seemed to go hungry could finally be answered. Unlike the others Clans' prey, fish still somehow infested the rivers like water rats, even in leafbare. No wonder Riverclan cats were so plump all the time. Rapidly he swung his head, chucking the struggling fish towards the base of Patchkit's favourite sunbathing rock. The pike made one final effort to escape, gathering it strength, it lunged towards the rushing river's edge. However, Appledusk's paw swept in like a hawk, effortlessly pinning it in place, not even needing to flexing his claws. It was over by it truly began, Appledusk quickly finished it off, with a classic killing bite, breaking its neck with a sharp snap.

The cream loner nodded up towards his son, "Care for some swimming lesson, Patchkit? I do.", he mewed, turning towards the river again, the waves gently lapping at his paws, submerging them. Flicking his long tail, Appledusk must of expected his son to be at his side in an instant like a brainless two-leg dog. He flicked his tail again, yet Patchkit still didn't move a mouse-length, quite comfortable where he was. Twisting on his heel, he faced Patchkit laying above him, tail swishing irritated, "Come on, Swimming lessons!", he insisted, "Who doesn't like those?". Continuing to lay there, Patchkit shrugged, "Threes thirds of the whole Clans.", he muttered, wanting to be smart with some sarcasm for once without Petalkit around.

The tip of Appledusk's tail twitching, annoyed that he was being made fun of by a kit, "Obviously those squirrels can't swim for the life of them, but us Riverclan cats can and very well in fact." he

boasted proudly, "And as a half Riverclan cat yourself, it should be a breeze for you. So let's go!", plunging into the water again with a large splash. "I almost drowned in a River you know!", he reminded the mousebrained Appledusk. However, he just continued to paddle around the swallows with the grace of a flailing fish and with the speed of a bobbing duck, "Near-death experiences are what make it fun.", he mewed, "I almost drowned as an apprentice, twice.".

Groaning, Patchkit flipped on his side, trying to ignore him, the crisp wind ruffling his fur. "Hey, Patchkit!", Appledusk's fake voice sounded with alarm, "What's that?!". Appledusk was floating in the water, tail pointing to some vague direction in the far distance. Patchkit stared at him, unimpressed. Did he really think he was that stupid? "I'm not going to fall for that twice in a row.", he mewed while letting a gaping yawn, his mouth hanging open. Grumbling to himself, Appledusk dipped his head under the water, trying to cool off his burning ego after being wrong, again. "That worked so well before.", he mumbled. "I was 4 moons at the time.", Patchkit countered, sounding rather bored, wanting sleep to grip him already. "Because you're so much more mature now at 5 moons.", Appledusk mocked. "Hey.", Patchkit sneered, "That 1 moon makes all the difference.", settling down again, curling into a tight ball.

Just then, a new thought came out of nowhere, making him snap out of his dazed state, a spark of excitement welling up inside him. Instantly, he violently threw himself onto all fours. Appledusk stopping aimlessly bobbing around rock pool, sensing the Patchkit's boiling emotions from the shift in his scent. "Are you ok?", he asked, blinking. Overhyped, Patchkit's veins had flowed with raw energy, bounded down the piled rocks like a hare. Not stopping until he was just a mouse-length from the edge, "Make me an apprentice!", he yowled, his voice cracking. Immediately, Appledusk's face turned stern, falling creepily quite like the echoing silence at night. Climbing out the river, Appledusk stood over tall Patchkit, reminding him just how much growing he still had yet to do. He slowly shook his brown head, "Patchkit, I'm sorry but we're rogues now, you know we can't do that. We don't have a leader just laying around.".

However, Patchkit wasn't going to give up that easily, rearing up and placing his tiny paws on Appledusk's chest, trying to pull off the innocent kit eyes, "But you can do it for me.". His father's leaf green eyes drifted away from his, now wanting to see his disappointed reaction, "You're not even 6 moons yet.", he muttered. Patchkit flopped to the ground again, lashing his short tail, "Do you see any leaders around here?". Appledusk shook his head, looking confused. "Exactly.", Patchkit proclaimed, "There are no leaders out here to tell what to do. Come on, Dad. I'm already doing hunting and training so I might as well. You don't want to me to remain 'kit' forever, do you?".

Finally, Appledusk sighed, resultantly nodding. Patchkit leapt for joy, scrambling back to up the rocks, until he directly stood above Appledusk, to make himself feel taller and Appledusk looks like puny little ant. "Urr-Patchkit?", Appledusk mewed below him. "Yes?", Patchkit asked, holding his head directly to the big blue sky, hoping the sun was directly behind, so his pose looked even more dramatic. Maybe it could even make him look like he has a mane made of blazing fire, like one of those ancient Lionclan warriors, minus the fire part. "This usually works the other way round. As the one granting your name, I need to stand above you. So off you pop.", flicking his tail. Patchkit puffed up his chest, "No rules out here, Dad. So you can do it from down there.", he mowed, the biggest, cheesiest grin on his face, it stretched so far up his face, he thought his lips would detach from his face. Sighing, Appledusk simply agreed with Patchkit's demands, probably just wanting to get this out the way, "Alright.", he agreed, muttering to himself, trying to remember how the apprentice went.

They directly faced each other, "I, Appledusk, former warrior of Riverclan, call upon Starclan to look down at this kit, who's proven he's just as deserving of apprenticeship as any Clan cat. So I ask for you to grant him, his rightful apprentice name.", he declared, his eyes suddenly lighting up with fierce green fire, really getting into the ceremony, pride making his fur flare, "From this day one, until you've earned your warrior name, you'll be known as Patchpaw. Do your best to uphold the Warrior code and faith in our ancestors.". That name rang in his head, booming louder and louder. Patchpaw.

He liked the sound of that. Unable to contain his excitement, he wailed on into the void of the sky, to celebrate his victory with Appledusk quickly joining in, sounding louder then sparrows. As the cries of triumph echoed out of existence, fading into the air, Patchpaw released it wasn't finished.

Appledusk was standing on four, "And your mentor shall be-", he attempted to keep the suspense but it wasn't working, "Me!", Appledusk shouted as if he was the kit becoming the apprentice instead, bounding up to join his son. They touched noses, Patchpaw imagining a crowd of cats surrounding them, cheering out his new name. Appledusk drew his head back, eye shimmering like the stars of silverpelt, "I know how to celebrate this grand occasion.", he declared.

"How?", Patchpaw gasped.

"Swimming lessons!", Appledusk grinned. Patchpaw's feelings of joy, suddenly dropped like a pebble.

Before he could say or do anything, Appledusk grabbed Patchpaw by the scruff, and flung himself back, dragging the whaling kit down with him, straight towards a blue nightmare, "Dad!", Patchpaw cried out, before the water flooded every one of his senses.

Chapter 14

"Get out!", Prickleleaf growled angrily, shoving Mapleshade roughly over the scent marks. She was forced to drive her claws into the damp earth to stop herself toppling like a tree, her lungs devoid of breath. Slowly, she turned back to stare blankly at the viscous Shadowclan warriors, slightly surprised they hadn't torn her apart by now. Lashing his tail, Prickleleaf bared his fangs, "Don't let us see you on our territory again. If we do, you know the consequences.". If he had said that to her just a day ago, she would snarl at him like a badger and probably raked his ears off.

However, no growl was forming in her throat, her throat too raw to do it. Even if she had the strength to do it, she wouldn't bother, she was too numb to feel offended by anything. An odd stillness was shared between the cats. With that, Prickleleaf rounded up his warriors with a sweep of the tail, marching them away. After a few stern glances back, the patrol had disappeared into the thick shadow fog of the pine forest, leaving Mapleshade alone. She stared at the floor, unmoving, time dragging on.

Finally, she managed to gather enough motivation to start forcing her legs to lift in the air, pressing them back down against the earth, eventually forming into a slow trot, wadding like a duck. She walked and walked, the world around her frozen in grey ice, the pale sun surrendering to the thick sheet of clouds. Despite her wounds being tended to, it still felt as if a fire burning from inside her gut, acidic venom burrowing into her muscles and burning from inside her chest. It seemed Sloefur had only done the bare minimum, not even giving her a painkiller, crazing poppy seeds. The lazy snakeheart. Eventually, the last of her strength was consumed, forcing her movements to speed of a snail. She needed food.

Her jaw slipping open, she tasted the bitter Leaf-bare wind, desperate to pick the scent of something, anything. She groaned as

she was forced to taste the scent of Thunderpath again, draining to return to it so soon. Pricking her ears, she heard the distant rumble of Monsters. Fear gripping her, knowing Bloomheart could be still prowling around there, eager for revenge after his mate's death. Yet, Mapleshade took a step forward. Among the scent of humid gravel and burning, lay another vile scent. Mapleshade couldn't believe herself at that moment, but hunger drove her on. Somehow despite all the pain, her body launched into a script, her muscles screaming at her.

Slipping into some thick layer of undergrowth, she tore her way through, despite stems and roots tangling around her. Eventually, she burst from the endless green cover, to be standing on a steep hillside, overlooking a narrow Thunderpath, smaller than the one she'd fought for her life besides, just earlier that day. Dusk was now setting over the land, turning the sky pale like giant claws had slashed through it, now bleeding with pink clouds. Searching the landscape, she finally spotted what she was looking for, what her body had dragged her to. There, laying among overgrown shrubs, lay the large body of a dead deer. No massive brown branch-like horns struck out of its head, telling her it was a doe. its body was torn open and tangled. It's large round black eyes still widen in shock, despite death gripping it. Another victim of the Thunderclan, just like Frecklewish and Dawnfeather. However, Mapleshade's heart insanity sank when she realized two creatures with fire red pelt surrounded the corpse, with bushy spiky fur, a white underbelly, and distinctive black tail tip. They were no cats.

In her haste, she'd failed to notice the overwhelming scent of a fox, in her rush to get to the dead doe. They were greedily gorging themselves on their prize, tearing it apart with canine teeth, their head covered in dried crusted blood. Before she could retreat back into the bushes, one of them raised their large heads from its meal, to look directly at the tortoiseshell. Mapleshade froze, spine arching. The male fox made a few yapping noising to its mate, with both of them now facing their natural enemy. Nobody moved for a long time as if they were nothing but trees, permanently rooted to the floor. Luckily, the female fox suddenly shook it's pelt down, boredom gripping it, returning to its feast. The male soon followed suit. Immediately, Mapleshade lunged into the shelter of the nearby

bramble, burying herself deep within them. Her heartbeat roared in her chest, legs aching. Needing to remember she was still injured. Settling down on the uncomfortable nest, a spikey pile of pine needles and acorns, she waited.

By the time fox pair had their fill, Mapleshade was threatening to doze off. As the foxes sluggishly padded away, stuffed sickly, their over-bloated bellies swayed like the swollen belly of a Queen. They followed the Thunderpath's edge up east, seemly unfazed by the occasional Monster zipping past them. Carefully, Mapleshade slipped out from her cover, nose twitching, watching as the foxes become nothing red dots in the distance. The direction they were heading was towards Riverclan territory. Interesting. After making a quick mental note, Mapleshade sped over to the fresh-kill, desperate to fill her hollow belly. Only it wasn't fresh-kill.

The sick tinged the back of her tongue as she approached, being slammed by the overpowering smell of crow-food. Maggots wriggled like worms among the open cracks, running across the deer's body like gorges. A swarm of flies buzzed around it, so large, it was like a black cloud. Now all the drive food had gone, to be left with a desire to starve instead. It was so rotten, it wasn't even crow-food, it was beyond that point. Even the birds of the night wouldn't want this. And a warrior definitely wouldn't, she deserved better. She was about to turn away, but a sudden stab of hunger made her tense up. Grasping her belly, she curled up into a ball, trying to deal with the pain. Regretfully, she began to crawl towards the pile of rotting meat and squirming maggots.

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She forced down another wave of vomit, partially pacing around randomly, desperately trying to find a fresh spring, willing to do anything to get rid of the vile taste. Her ears pricked like a rabbit's, when she finally made out the faint sound of trickling water. Instead of the frosty clear water she'd hoped for, it was tainted by mud and diet, impure. But Mapleshade didn't care, diving headfirst into the shallow stream, hurriedly and greedily gulping down mouthfuls of water, not stopping or slowing down. It went down so fast, some of it was forced the other way, choking and coughing it

out like blood. Her throat down clear, she gasped for air. She remained standing there as the stream lapped at her paws, feeling like her bones would crack under the sheer cold of what she stood in. Stumbling up the rocky shore, she realized the light had surrendered to the darkness, now in a void of blackness.

Despite forcing the crow-food down into the burning fire of her stomach, it still continued to plague her body, now light-headed. Yielding to the urge, she allowed the pain to set in, turning her skeleton frail, stumbling backwards. Collapsing, she bit her tongue on the way down. She didn't bother to get up, simply laying there amongst damp earth and rotting leaves. Trying to not let the cold settle in, she crawled to the tangle of roots of a fallen pine. Pressing herself against a root's curve, she felt the to rough bark against her ragged pelt, like a kit trying to find warmth in their mother's belly. But there was no warmth to be found for Mapleshade.

Then, a rustle comes from a nameless bracken patch. Immediately, her head violently jerked up, new life sparking up in scruffy she-cat, "Larchkit!", she exclaimed loudly and hopefully, cracking the night. Yet, it only echoed into nothingness. The only thing that appeared was a scrawny tiny shrew, a waste of fur. That was no kit, it wasn't even a cat. Gritting her teeth, Mapleshade watched it silently, not even trying to catch it. The brown creature scuttled around and ruffled around the mud for a while before disappearing into the shrivelled lifeless ferns. Stillness settled among the dead trees once more. There was no other soul around. At least she thought there wasn't.

Yet there he was. Slowly, stalking out of the thick purple fog, his pale pelt becomes tinted silver in the rays of chilling moonlight, as if frost was slowly creeping down his spine. Mapleshade blinked once, she blinked twice. But like expected, he didn't disappear, he wasn't a nightmare she could just wake up from and escape. He was real and revengeful. Bloomheart halted just a tree-length away from her, tail rattling smoothly from side to side like a branch caught in a gentle breeze. They simply stared at each other for an endless amount of time. Mapleshade remained pressed against the claw-like roots, not bothered to get up.

Still, Bloomheart continued to stare at her, judging. The clouds that

had once suffocated the low hanging sky, had now cleared to show the stars peeking through. Silver light flooded the forest. Strangely, Bloomheart's good eye glazed over with unknown emotions, twisting his head, until his eyes gazed up into the heavens. The stars reflected off his pale blue eyes like ice, the shimmering surface of the moonstone flashing it her mind, glowing with a million stars and colours. Nerves gleamed in his eyes, even his left eye despite the mist of blindness gathering there. Starclan watched from everywhere, from the highest mountain peak to the lowest valley. Was he starting to fear their ancestors' wrath? With a sigh, Bloomheart turned his back on her, slivering back into the darkness like an adder. As quickly he appeared, he was gone.

Abruptly, Mapleshade thrust upwards, heart pounding. New life was breathed into the hopeless she-cat as the panic surged through her like a fire. Her fur spiked to the sharpness of quills. Wait, why would he just spare her life that?! And where was he going? A haunting drain hung over her. Since she killed his mate, was he planning on returning the favour by killing off one of her family members? Not caring for sleep or her aching muscles anymore, Mapleshade allowed instincts to take over, pulsing through her veins as she desperately began the long journey to track down her lost loved ones, before that foxheart did.

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The breath gashed out of her throat like a stream of blood, as she stumbled the last of the way down the sloop. The pressure on her back leg had grown too much, like thorns, forcing her to limp the last of the way. A vast landscape inclosed on her from all sides, dusty fields fall of dry and brown grasses with seeds at their tips, swinging like reeds in the night gale, ruffling her pelt. She viciously shook, trying to block out the cold snapping at the edge of her ears. She'd travel so relentlessly and so ridiculously far, the whole night had come and gone, the tip of the pale sun beginning to peek above the horizon. Dawn approaching. Eventually, she spotted what she was searching, a large twoleg structure, with red wall crisscrossed with white stripes and a pointed roof. It towered over her like the pines back in Shadowclan territory.

As she stumbled the last few steps, she let herself collapse against

the bark wall, steadying herself, trying to catch her breath. Slightly surprised that she had enough energy for the exhausting journey, the rotten deer meat serving it's the purpose, even if it made her want to make her vomit every heartbeat. After a brief rest, she casually edged around the corner, her flank still pressed against the wall. Nose twitching and ears ups, she expected to scent the familiar scent of blood, but there wasn't any, none of the scrawny weeds tinted with red. Yet a scent still kept her on edge, the lingering oak smell of Thunderclan, very recent. Though strangely there was a multiple of them, Mapleshade paced in circles, snort against the floor. Had Bloomheart gained reinforcements by associating himself with his traitorous clanmates again? It seems ridiculous, he'd always been popular, but his earned reputation would have taken a major hit after the shenanigans at the Thunderpath.

While, the she-cat continued to pace round in circles as if she was brainless, a kit lay perched on the roof of the barn, glaring down at her with a stern expression. "Look who finally shows up.", voice scorned from above, coming abruptly. Shocked, Mapleshade immediately whipped around, ready to face a deadly opponent but relaxed when she released it was only her pesky daughter. Though still daunted, astonished a kit had been able to reach such heights, and so casual about it as well. With the skill of a squirrel as if she did a thousand times before, Petalkit launched from one wooden outcrop to the other, quickly and gracefully reaching the floor at her Mother's side.

Mapleshade blinked sadly from lost nostalgia. The creamy brown cat had grown the last time she saw her, probably up to her shoulder by now. She was plump with well-groomed sleek fur and a slender build. As if she was pure Riverclan cat, with no Thunderclan blood to taint it. Though, there was a coldness in her left swirling eyes like a leaf covered in bitter frost, telling the story of a cat that done and seen too much, an identical look elder would slug around with them, spreading their misery. Yet Petalkit wasn't an elder, she was a kit, a cruel world forcing her beyond her age. She sat with a strained pressure, as if expecting claws to come out of nowhere and rake her fur at any moment.

"Oh Mapleshade, what have you done this time?", Petalkit stirred, lashing a tongue over her back. Mapleshade snapped out of it, realizing she was letting her thoughts take over her senses. "That's mother to you.", she snapped, disgusted at Petalkit, "And What are you talking about?". Petalkit stopped grooming, placing her paws tightly together, almost defensive, "Dawnfeather, 'Mum'. That what I'm talking about.". Anger flashed in Petalkit's eyes, strangely irritated she'd killed one of the cats reasonable for their exile.

"How do you know about that?", Mapleshade questioned, shocked she knew. Petalkit subtly gulped, "Thunderclan popped round here at sunset, they're looking for you.", she mewed, her glare sharp, "Luckily for you, I sent them in the wrong direction.". The fur on her neck spiked, Thunderclan was looking for her again? A growl boiled in her throat, angered she had another obstacle to avoid. "To where?", Mapleshade demanded, taking a threatening step closer yet Petalkit kept seated, "The twoplace place just outside of Thuderclan territory.", she mumbled calmly.

"I'd never go there!", she spat offended. What did she think Mapleshade was? A kittypet like her?

Though Petalkit nodded, "Exactly.". Mapleshade then felt like a mousebrain, it took her so long to realize her daughter's trick. "And Bloomheart wasn't among them?", Mapleshade mewed, wanting it confirmed. Then, Petalkit lips edged upward into a wicked grin, "He won't be having the force of Thunderclan behind him anymore, that for sure. Because Beetail told me he's been exiled.". A spark of sick delight lit up in Mapleshade. Of course, for the murder of Frecklewish. Mapleshade imagined the scene when Oakstar saw his last surviving kit in bloody scraps, livid that another one of his trusted warriors had turned against him, Mapleshade began to wonder if anyone else would follow. Finally, Bloomheart would understand the suffering of exile and betrayal.

But then confusion set in. Why hadn't Bloomheart gone to straight for Petalkit? She already bared the deep scars of the previous failing, surely he wouldn't miss the opportunity to put things right. She was like a sitting duck here in the barn, just waiting for someone or something to snatch her up and eat her. Though, by the looks of it, glancing over there, twolegs had boarded up the ground

entrance, only leaving the one higher up, near the roof, they'd used to escape with their lives, all those moons ago. So probably only Barn cats knew the special route to inside the red hive, stashed with mountains of golden grass.

An awkward silence settled between the mother and daughter, both failing to find any meaningful words for each other. Still, Petalkit continued to groom, her pale tongue searching for the diet between the toes of her front paw. Mapleshade blinked, realizing Petalkit wasn't well-groomed, she was overly-groomed, a nervous tick. Claws of annoyance struck against her chest, you wouldn't be catching Larchkit acting so pathetically. Briefly, she considered literally dragging the kit away from the Barn, away from the honorless life of a kittypet and into the proper life of a warrior. A sense of horror-filled drain hung over her, terrified of the very possible reality, she could be spending her night alone, in complete isolation. She forced it down, no that didn't matter right now.

Eventually, Petalkit managed to find a convocation starter, though still awkward and stiff, "So

How's Patchkit and Larchkit.", she mewed quietly. Sighing, Mapleshade had to spill the truth, despite how much she hated it, "Patchit somewhere out there with your father. And Larchkit- he's just joined Shadowclan.". Even if she couldn't read mind, she could sense the storm of mixed emotions swirling inside the young she-cat from the scent alone. "Right.", Petalkit muttered with a blank face. What was the pest thinking? Was she relieved or disappointed in her brother? Mapleshade started long and judging Petalkit returned her stare, blinking.

"You look like awful.", Petalkit gasped, now standing. Anger boiled to the surface, with Mapleshade welcoming it, "I don't need to snide remarks, Petalkit!", she snapped, her head launching forward like a striking snake. Yet Petalkit wouldn't stop pressuring her, "I'm serious, when was the last time you ate?".

"That doesn't matter.", Mapleshade retorted, bitter. Slowly, Petalkit slid closer, her nose pricking with the rotten smells of the scruffy thin rouge. Her eyes widen, "Have you been eating crow-food?", she asked desperately. Mapleshade made her keep her distance with a

warning slash just skimming the edges of Petalkit's whiskers, "Don't come near me and don't ask questions.", she hissed.

Immediately, Petalkit crept back, crouched slightly lower to the dirt, returning to her nervous grooming. Her fur around her neck bristled like puffed up feathers. "What are you trying to hide from me?", she questioned, aggressive, not holding back, teeth and claws bared.

With a deep breath, the confidence finally building in her, holding her chin and tail high, "My name not Petalkit anymore, Mapleshade. It's Petal. Just Petal.", she announced proudly.

Suddenly, a vortex of pure hatred raged through Maplreshade's husk of a body, anger burning the hole in her chest even further after Larchkit's betrayal. What was happening? Who was this she-cat standing in front of her? This wasn't the daughter she once known. Mapleshade hadn't sludged around with swarming boulders in her belly for 2 moons, just to create this thing. The kittypet creature. Muffled sounds echoed around her as if she was enclosed in a tight cavern, trapping her. Her blurred vision drifted over the corner of the blood-red Barn, a black and white shadow standing here. An invisible force tightly gripped around her, feeling like it would crash her but instead it violently yanked her towards the Barn cat. As her body threw itself as Barley, the energy tom that corrupted her daughter. "You caused this!" she screeched at Marler, like a crow with a broken voice.

But instead of launching off the ground, high into the air like a bird soaring to freedom, her back leg betrayed her, awkwardly snapping mid-leap, causing her to topple over like. As she lay in the dust, she flexed her leg, the tingling pain soon set in. The stupid muscles twisted around the bone still hadn't fixed itself, shredded like a moss-ball after it been played to death by a reckless kit. There were flickers of movements around her, black blurs, like the shadows of fireflies. Still, Mapleshade wouldn't surrender, recently pushing herself, crawling towards her prey like a snail, bond the slithering across the mud for its entire life. Finally, she could make out proper words, like raindrops forming a pubble, "No, Mapleshade, stop.", Petal desperately begged, padding beside her, pressing her soft pelt into her ragged one. Yet Mapleshade continued. "Mother!", she

repeated more sternly.

Seeing it was useless, Petal turned to the bewildered Myler, "Get out of here, quickly!". With a quick nod, Marley disappeared around the corner. No! Mapleshade griped the dirt floor with her claws, heaving herself forward, homelessly clambering after him. Out of nowhere, a sudden pressure in her injured leg, making her halt, splitting in pain. "Are incapable of being around someone, without trying to kill them?", Petal exclaimed, irritated, still pressing her small paw deep into the red depths of Mapleshade's wound. Mapleshade tensed up, barely handling the torture.

Seemly satisfied she dealt out enough pain, Petal released her grip, helping Mapleshade to her paws. Still on numb legs, Mapleshade flinched away from the support of Petal's shoulder, stumbling away in a random direction. She didn't care where, she just needed to get away from this place. "Where are you going?", Petal suddenly blurted, surprisingly worried. Why would she care?

"And don't know who you are anymore, but one thing for sure, you're no daughter of mine.", Mapleshade growled, looking back. Petal remained frozen with shock for dragging heartbeat, as if Mapleshade had just sprouted wings. Staring at her with stupid gaping expression. Ignoring her, Mapleshade carried on limping down the hillside, gradually creating distance between the former mother and daughter. Then, Petal called out to her, "You can't go!", she pleaded, "You'll die in the state you're in!".

Yet, Mapleshade simply ignored her, too tired and lifeless to shout or even utter another word. Annoyingly, Petal's persistence still held, a gentle pitter-patter of loose stones and pebbles as she rushed down the hill after her. Then, Mapleshade's patience cracked as she felt Petal's paws wrap around her dragging dull tail. Snapping with fury, Mapleshade whirled around, claws unsheltered, "Stay away from me, you filthy kittypet!", Mapleshade yelled, crazed. Before Petal even had the chance to defend herself, Mapleshade brought her hooked talon down right into Petal's open eye, stabbing it. Instantly, Petal screeched and whaled, violently flinching away, upturning the eye still attached to the claw, ruining it even more. Wildly, she flailed on the ground, a thick layer of blood oozing around the rim of her eyelid, the eye reduced to white mush, like

upturned earth. Once the eye healed, Petal's vision could never be the same, if it wasn't already permanently blinded. Mapelshade just stared, daunted. Her pure white claw had now been strained a dark red. Back at the Barn, Marley heard Petal's screams of terror, appearing from the top of the rocky sloop.

"Petal!", he yowled out in horror, the adrenaline pumping through his veins giving him the speed, rivalling a Monster. Strangely fast for a kittypet like himself. It was funny what panic could do to cat. While Mapleshade could only remain rooted to the floor, Myler protect leaned over Petal like she was his own daughter, his soft fur puffed up and his usually gentle eyes, now glazed over with ice. "G-go", he shuttered, "Stay away from us!", pathetically shaking.

With nothing she could say or do to make it better, she obeyed. Silently limping off.

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She shouldn't of put it pasted Appledusk to be hoovering around his old home like a pestering fly. Even after everything his clanmates had to do to him and his kits, the daft tom still flocked to the rivers, letting native nostalgia blind him. Her son and old mate's stale scent had brought her far up the gorge river. This far north up its banks, meant it wasn't really inside a gorge anymore, instead the banks were more like small pebbly beaches, allowing the river to stretch out, now much wider. Yet somehow, it was much deader than further upstream as it burrowed it's way into Riverclan territory.

The current was dragged along even faster as it approached the sheer drop off a tall cliff, to create a mighty waterfall. Which Mapleshade stared at in astonishment.

The torment of flowing water must have been the height of the tallest of pines, endless foam and bubbles hissing at it's the base. And the roar it made was deafening. Despite wanting to wonder at it some more like a kit, she forced herself on, she came here for a far more important reason then sightseeing. If Bloomheart hadn't gone for Petal to avenge his mate, then that only left Patchkit and Appledusk. Luckily for her, smooth slabs on stone lay on the cliffside, making for an easy way up. Though annoyingly, it seemed to have been carved by Twolegs, that same shiny stone used to silver poles at the edge of each slab, probably so no overexcited twoleg kit went careening off the side. But Mapleshade reluctantly accepted the help of their structure, in a race against time.

As she stumbled the last of the way, up to the top, a small woodland come into view, wide spaces between the stumpy trees. Yet somehow, despite it being leafbare, the grass still glowed a bright green. Thick hedges bordered this sides of the field, not enough undergrowth for a flushing Thunderclan cat. Deciding to remain safe, she entered the maze of the jagged stones that lined the river's edge, smooth under the paw and creamy in colour. At last, the burden woodland made way for a long stretching patch of reeds, dead logs sticking out the ground like brown fangs. The tree surrenders to marshes, filled with dried bracken and moss covering stone ground. Like a mix of Windclan and Riverclan territory. Finally the first sign of life, serval old fish bones scattered by the water's edge. Relief flooded over her, when scents lingering in the air were familiar, a strange mix of Thunderclan and Riverclan, even a bit of rouge forming.

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threatened them.

Following the trial, the signs of life only continued to grow, more bones and more scents, fresh and old alike. "Dad!", a familiar voice suddenly whaled out. Instantly, Mapleshade's head flung from the ground, searching the nearby shorelines. Sure enough, there was a large crashing of water as two cats plummeted into the deep waters.

Then relief flooded over her as the two cats resurfaced, a pale brown and Calcio head bobbing in the water, both failing to notice her yet from behind the wall of reeds. Irritation made her whiskers twitch, on how far they'd fallen since their days with her. They shouldn't let their guard ever, she hadn't even disguised her scent. If she were Bloomheart, then she could of easily snatched up Patchkit in the blink of an eye. The kit scrambled up the protruding stones, his pelt drooping with water, making him look like a long-hair cat. He perched on a narrow ledge, shelving, feeling sorry for himself. Without shouting, any words were impossible to make out from this distance, as the father and son continued to joke and laugh with each other.

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Mapleshade halted, gasping. Confusion swirling her mind, blurring her vision. How could they treat her like this? "I'm your mother, Patchkit!", she exclaimed loudly, a tree-length between them, "Or have you forgotten that?".

Patchkit's eyes widen, seemly unable to answer, shuffling serval paces back, nervous. Was the kit just confused? Before she starts to approach again, Appledusk placed a tail between her and Patchkit, hissing twice as loud as before. Mapleshade's claws scraped against the bare rock, making a sharp screeching noise. Appledusk couldn't

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"His name is Patchpaw now and Yes I can.", the bitter tom retorted, "If you're willing to kill me, then I can't trust you with our kits either.". There was a pause, as his green eyes flicked wildly among the landscape as if desperately searching for something. "Where's Larchkit?", he demanded.

Mapleshade flinched, her weakness threatening to be exposed, that she hadn't been able to control her last obedient son. "He's joined Shadowclan.", she finally forced herself to admit. Patchpaw and Appledusk shared weary glances, all too aware of the treatment the Clans gave to half-clan cats. Eventually, Appledusk shrugged, "Well-.", he muttered, "At least he's finally away from you.". Mapleshade felt like her whole body was freezing over, slowly turning to ice, in complete disbelief. Each that came out of Appledusk's mouth was like a sharp icicle, stabbing her. Where those really cats she'd once knew? The cat she'd once loved and the cat she'd given birth to? She felt hollow inside. Not realizing, she still hadn't done what she comes to do.

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In the background, Appledusk casually dipped his head, "You heard the kit - Leave.".

****

She stumbled aimlessly, into trees, maybe some bushes as well, covered in thick sheets of shadow, frantic.

Wildly, she began to pace around the narrow clearing, her mind reeling.

Movement in corners of her fierce red eyes.

Were the trees growing around her, were they enclosing on in on her?

Halting, she twisted, growling, expecting someone to be there. A flicker of light. Was that someone? Rearing up onto her hind legs, she brought down her whole weight onto the bush, pounding it with all her might. Yet, the leaves just rustled. Nothing. There wasn't anyone there? There had to be someone there.

No, there wasn't. Was there? There couldn't be. Why would anyone want to go after this worthless lump of bones and flesh? A stain. Only taking up space, it that was she was?

No one- Nobody- Not even the moles that burrow beneath the mud and diet would want her. She was below it. Wasn't she?

Was that they thought of her, a piece of crow-food to be buried under the earth, to be forgotten? Everything and everyone has done that to her! Even the Siamese rouge. Why hadn't he killed her? Wasn't she worthy prey? Was she not worth his time? Why hadn't he gone after her kits yet?

A presence hooved above her, just out of reach. A green den, filled with warm light, birds singing, cozy soft moss, three bundles of homeless fur at her swollen belly, the sweetest of scents. Their round young faces, filled with wonder as they explored the big wide

world, so ignorant to the nightmares that lay within.

But those weren't their faces. They weren't the kits she knew.

Their faces were enraged, bitter, blank, pity, terrified-

Not her kits. Those weren't her kits. Her kits were the ones that wouldn't judge her, the ones that would see the spark of light in her no matter what she did. No matter how many times her paws were stained red.

Strangely, she didn't seem to move anymore. Not standing anymore either. Laying down?

What is she doing now? What was it she felt? Hopeless? Hollow? Was she just going to stay here, die and rot away?

Her Heartbeat pounding- beating of a crow's tattered wings as it set off into the black skies- Wind rustling the dead leaves- snuffling as a mouse under a withered bush searched in vain for a life-giving nut - a kit's voice- his voice - Patchkit's younger voice like honey - "I never want to leave you."

Split like toxic venom drilled down the side of her hanging mouth. You'd leave me, you said... Liar! Snakeheart! Traitor!

Those things weren't her kits anymore. She was their mother. She created them. She gave them flesh and bone, She gave them the right to live and she should have the right to take it away.

They should have drowned back in that raging river all those moons ago! At least, then, they'd still be hers. They'd be her kits, no one else's.

She twisted around. If she lost those ones, no matter. She'd get a new one. A new, fresh start.

A gentle pattern of leaves, as raindrops, dripped onto the forest floor. Rain. Water. Streams. Rivers.

Riverclan.

Now she knew exactly where to get a new one.

Chapter 15

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Movement in corners of her fierce red eyes.

Were the trees growing around her, were they enclosing on in on her?

Halting, she twisted, growling, expecting someone to be there. A flicker of light. Was that someone? Rearing up onto her hind legs, she brought down her whole weight onto the bush, pounding it with all her might. Yet, the leaves just rustled. Nothing. There wasn't anyone there? There had to be someone there.

No, there wasn't. Was there? There couldn't be. Why would anyone want to go after this worthless lump of bones and flesh? A stain. Only taking up space, it that was she was?

No one- Nobody- Not even the moles that burrow beneath the mud and diet would want her. She was below it. Wasn't she?

Was that they thought of her, a piece of crow-food to be buried under the earth, to be forgotten? Everything and everyone has done that to her! Even the Siamese rouge. Why hadn't he killed her? Wasn't she worthy prey? Was she not worth his time? Why hadn't he gone after her kits yet?

A presence hooved above her, just out of reach. A green den, filled with warm light, birds singing, cosy soft moss, three bundles of homeless fur at her swollen belly, the sweetest of scents. Their round young faces, filled with wonder as they explored the big wide world, so ignorant to the nightmares that lay within.

But those weren't their faces. They weren't the kits she knew.

Their faces were enraged, bitter, blank, pity, terrified-

Not her kits. Those weren't her kits. Her kits were the ones that wouldn't judge her, the ones that would see the spark of light in her no matter what she did. No matter how many times her paws were stained red.

Strangely, she didn't seem to move anymore. Not standing anymore either. Laying down?

What is she doing now? What was it she felt? Hopeless? Hollow? Was she just going to stay here, die and rot away?

Her Heartbeat pounding- beating of a crow's tattered wings as it set off into the black skies- Wind rustling the dead leaves- snuffling as a mouse under a withered bush searched in vain for a life-giving nut - a kit's voice- his voice - Patchkit's younger voice like honey - "I never want to leave you."

Split like toxic venom drilled down the side of her hanging mouth. You'd leave me, you said... Liar! Snakeheart! Traitor!

Those things weren't her kits anymore. She was their mother. She created them. She gave them flesh and bone, She gave them the right to live and she should have the right to take it away.

They should have drowned back in that raging river all those moons ago! At least, then, they'd still be hers. They'd be her kits, no one else's.

She twisted around. If she lost those ones, no matter. She'd get a new one. A new, fresh start.

A gentle pattern of leaves, like raindrops, dripped onto the forest floor. Rain. Water. Streams. Rivers.

Riverclan.

Now she knew exactly where to get a new one.

Chapter 16

Long clouds of oranges, yellows and reds streaked across the sky like claw marks. She couldn't really remember whether it was sunrise or sunset anymore, not that it mattered anyway. There were contrast gashes of wind batters her clamp of bushes as Monsters stormed past, like the world was heavily panting. The constant pain in her legs had slowly turned to numbness, no more blood oozing out, now harder to crust. Staring back with a bitter grudge, she spotted the tips of the pines of Shadowclan in the far distance. Quickly, she shook her head. No, he wasn't her kit anymore. Let him go, suppressing the lost memories. None of them was. None of them would matter anymore once she got a paw on a new one, one that would fulfil the destiny they foolishly rejected.

Then noticing the white and greeny crust buried deep within her flesh, the crushed up herbs still there. Without even commanding her body to do it, her upper lip twisted up, hissing to herself. Only a fool and coward would accept the help of the enemy. Now stressed, that Sloefur had slipped in some kind of dangerous herb. Had he poisoned her? Groaning in pain, her teeth gnawed into the opening, beginning to pluck out the green mush from her raw skin. Like a more disgusting form of grooming, she tore the plant pulp from each wound, dumping into the long grass, covering it up as something to be forgotten. What remained was upturned skin and fur, fading from a pale pink to a raw red. Now flesh blood dripped from the cracks. Not that it mattered. Ever since her exile, she gotten in too many fights to count. From head to tail, her ragged pelt was crisscrossed with a layer of long scars like a spider web. Her other wounds had managed to heal without killing her, those ones would be no different.

Letting off of deep sighing, Mapleshade unsettled from the soft grassy floor. Trying to ignore was getting her nowhere. The deer's body seemed a bit more rotten then before, she swore there were more maggots at least. It was a messy business but it was the only easy source of food around for sky-lengths.

Slowly, Mapleshade crept closer to the deer course, still there, from last time she'd been here. The vile odour suffocating her, forcing her to retreat again. Could she do it again?

Carefully, she selected the piece of raw meat that seemed the least likely to give her food poisoning. The front hoof seemed the least decayed, still recognizable as a foot, rather than a pile of organs. Greedily, her teeth gripped the wrist, feeling the broken bone underneath. With a mighty tug, the foot was torn off with a satisficing rip, coming off with surprising ease. Her mood sunk like a pebble, when she glanced inside of it. It was hollow. With layers upon layers of wriggling insects. Groaning, she violently shook it, pink creatures shattering onto the ground like rain. Their grumose appearance sight ruining the lush surroundings. The skin and fur would have to do, gripping it in her mouth, swallowing it whole like hairless bird chick.

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Honestly, she was rather impressed with herself that she wasn't dead right now, after trying to eat that thing whole. Another wave of bile twinged at the back of the tongue, threatening to puck a few precious foods remains still in her stomach. Luckily, it wasn't worse than last time she'd tried to eat crow-food. Forcing it down, she narrowed her focus to just travelling as she hurried up the Thunderpath, the freshly settled darkness leaving it devoid of Monsters. The odour of fox edging up her the tunnels of her nose, a nasty thing. The tree slowly becomes more and more scarce, until eventually Mapleshade was left with wide-open fields, dotted with the occasional island of woodland. Blue lines and specks burrowed through the land, covered to the dream with deep pounds and swirling rivers. The unwelcome scent of Riverclan greeted her. Yet that wasn't where the fox scent took her, it took her in a long loop around the borders but never daring to venture inside. Then, she froze, bristling.

An overgrown gove stood before her, tightly paced together like one massive plant. There amongst the cluster of thick thorns, brambles, ferns and other various bushes, where the scent trial met its end. Evidence of the firey red creatures that lived here, lay scattered everywhere; old bones, scuffed mud imprinted with large pawprints

and shuffled dead leaves, as their long snorts raided through it, searching for Starclan knows what. The scent of fox overpowering her sensitive nose. Yet something lay amongst revolting aroma, the silky scent of milk. Pricking her ears, a soft whisper of newborn paps echoed in the branches far above. A crooked grin grew on her lips like ivy. Perfect.

Edging out from her hiding spot amongst the roots of an ancient oak, she let out three deafening sharp yaps, spitting the night like a talon. Within the tangle of undergrowth and tree roots, a single red head poked out, warily searching its domain. The pale moonlight gave the clearing a silver tint, illuminating it. However, the rest of the forest remained engulfed by the night, the thick canopy shielding it from the light. She crouched lower to the dump floor, motionless, not letting a single muscle twitch. Half of the mother-fox's body remained underneath the earth, only it's head and front legs visible, peering around. The thick shadows of the oak doing its job and keeping Mapleshade concealed. She needed to lure the fox out completely.

After a brief pause, it was dreadfully obvious the male fox wasn't there to protect his prized new litter. This time, the female fox was alone to protect its paps from the unknown dangers of the outside world. Mapleshade set the plan in motion.

There was a rush of warm blood while excitement and fear pulsed through her veins. Before the mother-fox could get too comfortable and slip back into the safety of her ben, Mapleshade grabbed the largest stick to her, its rough bark against her tongue. With all her strength, Mapleshade sent to the snapped branch deeper into the woodland behind her, flying high into the air, finally disappearing into the swallowing darkness. A moment of silence, before a loud clatter struck the air as the stick crushed through the undergrowth, hitting something hard. Instantly, the mother-fox shot out from the den, standing in the open, defensive, it's snort snipping in her direction.

Sticking the edges of the clearing, Mapleshade crawled away from the oak, forced to use her whiskers to sense her surroundings, blind in the darkness. Up and under through tangle of trees roots she went, keeping to the deepest darkest layers of black, invisible. The

mother-fox took a cautious step towards her original hiding spot, long fangs ready for thrashing any threats. As Mapleshade backed up against a frail trunk, a bark texture hit her cracked paw-pad as she stepped onto another branch. A good steady one. Grabbing it, she swirled round. Carefully, she aimed in the direction the mother-fox's piercing vision. Satisfied, Mapleshade launched it against a band of trees off to the east, slightly beyond the clearing. Another pause, then came a cluster of wood against wood. Suddenly, the female let out an enraged yap, furiously charging after the sound, disappearing into the trees. Now Mapleshade had the perfect opening.

Without a heartbeat to lose, Mapleshade madly scrambled out of the stems, dashing to the clearing, the moonlight sweeping over her like silver rain. Letting her nose and ears guild her, the milk scent and whispering of pups quickly let her locate the fox den, well hidden among the bushes, near the base of great alder. The ground was loose and shifty, Mapleshade struggling not to stumble on the crumbling sand as she dived into the narrow hole, completely black, like a void. Sand walls pressed against her fur tightly, like it was enclosing in on her. Then, her long whiskers meet something, tiny, furry and warm. A wriggling pile of them. Not caring which one, Mapleshade snatched up the closet one, the pup letting off a terrified-fill wail, calling out to its mother. Mouse-dung.

Trying to wildly twist round in the paced space, she reached out through the blackness, burrowing upwards. Or was she? It was impossible to tell. Luckily, she soon broke out into the open frosty air, free from the stuffy humid den. While the fox cub struggled in her grasp, the mother-fox had started to return to the clearing. The two stood there unmoving for a moment, staring. The chase was on. Without even thinking, Mapleshade instantly twisted on her heel, sprinting like she never had before, she flew through the trees like a deer, the mother-fox on her tail. Right towards Riverclan territory. Her heartbeat quicken and panic shot through her. So this is what it felt like to be prey!

Trying to get free, the cub began flailing like a maggot, nipping at her chin. Even if it felt like it, this wasn't a kit, so she didn't hold back, digging her jaw tighter around its scruff, making it shriek in

pain, feeling thick blood tinge her mouth. Hearing the cry of its baby, the mother-fox seemed to gain an even greater drive, closing the gap between them. The fur on her neck stood on end as she felt the fox's hot breath on her tail tip.

Her heart threatening to burst from her chest, she made a split-second decision and just went with it. Making a risky manoeuvre, she twisted her whole body, making a tight turn, her paws skidding across the ground like ice. Somehow she managed to keep her balance, heading in the opposite direction, creating distance between her and the fox, who was forced to make a larger lop. Between the gaps in the thin trunks, the land dramatically sloped down, out of sight. Mapleshade staggered as she sped downhill, more like controlled falling then running. Not surrounded by trees anymore, Mapleshade was now in open plains of tall reeds, muddy fields, wide rivers, narrow streams and swishing grasses. Finally within Riverclan's borders.

A mighty racket caused her ears to strain, as the mother and cub yelped and howled, longly calling out to each other. In the far distance, emerging from the night, a red creature was rapidly closing in, returning to its cub's aid. The father-fox now on her trial. Confusion swirled in her on whether this was the best or worst thing that could happen. For Riverclan, it would make her life easier as they tried to fight off two foxes instead of one. Yet, that could only happen if she herself wasn't ripped apart beforehand!

The once confident she-cat was slowly giving into a panic. Once this would have been no more than training, but now- now she genuinely feared for her life. The mother-fox jaws snapped at the air, only a mouse-length from Mapleshade's swishing tail. With the father-fox not much further behind now. Her muscles began burning, the old wound around her legs reopening, oozing with fresh blood. Strangely, the fox cub swinging in her mouth, once like a feather, was now a boulder, weighing her down. Starclan help me! She wanted to cry out.

Two distinctive lands began to form, a large body of clear water and a marshy bog, covered with sucking mud. Both could easily bring the chase to a halt. Not accepting it, Mapleshade began to make a long strenuous arch, following the edges of the Marshes, yet

still not stepping into it. Eventually, it led an endless patch of reeds, Mapleshade was more than happily plunged into. Urgently, she wanted to catch her breath and rest her aching bones, but she could not stop now. She forced herself on despite the pain. Leaves whipped at her face as she stumbled through the reeds, threatening to trip her up. Just a bit further. There was a loud rustling of reeds as the foxs struggled through it too.

A familiar fishy-scent lingered in the atmosphere, the scent of Riverclan cats overpowering. Many of them gathered in one place. Mapleshade allowed herself a quick grin, almost there. Ahead, thick steady walls of reeds and grass stood, weaved together unnaturally. The walls of Riverclan camp.

Pacing, Mapleshade moved until she could scent milk, halting. The Nursery. Tightening her teeth round the fox cub, she quickly spans round like a whirlpool. With enough speed built up, she flung the cub over the wall into the clearing beyond, groaning. Instantly, Mapleshade desperately and wildly tumbled, retreating deeper into the thicket, collapsing, gasping for breath. The two mates run side by side now, their mouths hanging open. Without the cub, the parents paid Mapleshade no notice, instead effortless tearing through the tangle of reeds, pure fury burning off of them. Annoyingly, they didn't rip through into the Nursery but went straight into the open clearing. Suddenly, there was a burst of deafening noise, like a storm as cats and foxes alike began madly screaming at each other. Through the walls, Mapleshade could spot frantic flickers of movements inside, the Riverclan camp erupted into utter chaos. Getting to her paws, Mapleshade clambered through the freshly made entrance to the camp.

The female stood at the centre of the clearing, standing over its cub, mercilessly lashing out at any cat that came too near with snapping teeth. There was a tang of blood on the breeze. Meanwhile, the male brawled with four or five separate cats clinging onto it, the Riverclan warriors trying to drag it to the ground. A mass of cats swarmed around the foxes, quickly closing in on them. The foxes may be larger, tougher and meaner but not even they could compete with the so many foes. Luckily for Mapleshade, she was able to join the rapid flow of the yowling crowd, too occupied and

panicked with the foxes, to notice the Thunderclan cat among their ranks. For now at least, if she was another cat, that's all that mattered to them.

Endless pelts pressed tightly against her, almost crushing her in the mad scramble. The clanmates shuffled and shoved in all directions, unsure what to do. Amongst the mayhem, Mapleshade could start to put names to faces; Darkstar fraught right beside her warriors, gripping the male fox's head, battering its ears. Perchpaw, stood firmly at the Elder's den, fur puffed up. Yet if she started to recognize others, others could start to recognize her. Any heartbeat now. Suspicious glances starting to build up alarmingly quick, Mapleshade narrowly ducking away each time before they could get a better look. Not risking it anymore, she slunk back into darkest corners of the camp like a silent shadow.

Now, Riverclan cats had managed to get a hold of themselves, joining together, piling around the foxes, slowly driving them back into the entrance. The mother-fox had the cub swinging in its jaws, fear glinting in its round eyes. The madness just kept on growing and growing, until Mapleshade finally grew impatient; she darted through the reeds like a hawk, diving through the crowds, using her body like a log, ramming into female's head. The force knocking the cub from her grasp and towards the Nursery, Mapleshade back into hiding before anyone knew what was happening. As the cub rolled away, the male left off an angered yap, thrusting away it's attackers, latching it jaw around tail and throats, throwing them away as easily as leaves. Blood splashing against the sand. Now free, it raised towards red pup.

Though the female managed to keep ahead of its mate, shooting forward, snatching up the cub again. Though the male fox didn't seem satisfied, instead of fleeing with it cub, it turned on the Nursery, hungry for young blood. Rearing up, it ripped through the dense barrier of brambles with its front paws, like it was digging a burrow. Then out of nowhere, the Riverclan deputy, Spiketail let out a battle cry, "Protect the Nursery!", he yelled. Bravely, he pounded like Leopardclan cat, gripping the fox's back, biting down. However, the male fox instantly retaliated, reaching behind it back, taking Spiketail into its mouth. Like helpless prey, the grey tom was

ruthlessly thrashed around, fur and blood splattering everywhere. Terrified, a fresh wave of warriors came rushing into their deputy's aid: Milkfur crunched down into its back leg while Rainfall kicked out of its flank. Screeching in pain, the fox was forced to drop its prey. Yet Milkfur's and Rainfall's efforts proved for nothing, as Spiketail fell heavily to the floor with thump, dead. Mapleshade blinked, feeling strangely hollow.

Through her reed cover, Mapleshade noticed the fox had done its job, a gaping hole now left in the Nursery, horrified Queens and kits peering through in the gloom. The tables were finally turning, as the warriors starting overwhelming the mother and cub, pushing back into the entrance, while the male remained stubborn, still fighting. Releasing as the foxes could flee at any moment, Mapleshade was forced to make her move, reeds parting as she crawled through them, edging towards the Nursery. Just a bit closer.

Her pulse surged when she released to get there, she would need to go out into the open, exposing herself to the outside world. Yet determination drove her on. She'd made it this far, there was no way she was backing up now. Find a kit, grab it and get away, that's all she needed to do. And there was specific litter she had in mind. Tucked away in the furthest corner, laid a dark orange tabby, tightly wrapping her body around a precious bundle of kits. Reedshine. Mapleshade hissed to herself like a snaked. Not waiting anymore, Mapleshade burst from the safety of the reeds, straight towards her prize, not caring for the yowls of anger as she sped past the Riverclan cats.

Reedshine's deep blue widen in horror, all the Queens gasping, as Mapleshade began entering inside. "Mapleshad-", Reeshine began.

However, she couldn't utter the full word before the entire Nursery finally gave in to the damage, collapsing into itself.

Chapter 17

The cats cried out as large twigs and leaves caved in around them before they could do anything and before she knew it, Mapleshade was completely buried, surrounded in all directions by rubble. The air turned humid and hot. The sudden weight made Mapleshade groan. The dead undergrowth enclosing her shuffled and shifted as if it was alive as the Queens and kits around her tried to find each other. Desperate mothers called out to their kits. Not if Mapleshade had something to say about it, using her claws to burrow through.

Pricking her ears, Mapleshade tried to focus on specific sound among the muffled voices, a voice like water boiling in steam on a blazing humid day. And she finally heard it, "Shykit!? Applekit?! Where are you? I'm right here, follow my voice!". Mapleshade would have leapt for joy if it wasn't for the pile of sticks piled on top of her. Seemed that she had yet to find two of her kits, all for the taking. Mapleshade just needed to find one of them first. As luck would have it, a sleek black tom brushed against her ragged pelt, as a kit hurried past her, not even giving her a second glance. Just when she was about to snatch him up, she realized he was neither Reedshine's kit and too large, close to apprentice size. Too old to brainwash. So choose to ignore him.

Driving herself on, Mapleshade went through the endless layers of collapsed brown and green plants. How far did it go? Distant muffled voices filled the air, coming from above the sea of brambles. Then scraping noises come, as claws worked at the top layers of the collapsed Nursery, Riverclan Warriors starting the attempt to free the trapped cats. And just to make her problems worse, a sleek tail swept against her wide face.

Before she knew it, another flank was pressed against her as the fellow Queens accidentally bumped into each other. The black she-cat, Blackbee's face twisted up in hatred like a shrivelled flower, "You caused this, didn't you?", she accused. Darting forward, belly

still sliding against the floor, Blackclaw drove her teeth deep into Mapleshade's leg. She wanted to cry out in agony as her attacker found the sweet point, her teeth in the open wound. Aching to get away, Mapleshade kicked out against Strokweed's head, causing her to roll away. Now free, she didn't stand and fight like she should have done, instead, she desperately tried stumbling away. Scooping up pawfuls of bark and moss, she threw it behind her, trying burrow away while burying Strokweed at the same time. Don't stop.

Mapleshade paused, sensing the world around her with whiskers, nose and ears. She seemed to have lost the enraged she-cat. Though worrying, the pressure on her back seemed to lessen with each passing moment, as the layers of brambles were slowly removed, the warriors above getting closer to discovering her. They sounded nearer too, their voices as clear as water. Arching her ears, she fixed her hearing on the soft mew of kit. A young one. Pushing a large branch and a few leaves aside, Mapleshade finally found what she was looking for. A tiny she-kit, no older than a moon, with a pale creamy pelt and white paws and chest. A striking resemblance to her father. Her new daughter. Immediately, Mapleshade greedily scooped up the kit, wildly searching for a way out.

Suddenly, a brown tabby muzzle poked through the ceiling, like a bird's beak bursting into a worm's tunnels, trying to pluck it out. The tom's muzzle was just a mouse-length from Mapleshade's ear, his hot breath on her fur, "Stay still, we're going to get you out!", he called down to her. There was a rustling from all around, as the Warriors finally began to drag out the Queens and kits from the rubble. Holding her breath, Mapleshade slowly edged backwards, away from the tabby, his mouth like a brown icicle. He must of felt the strange cat under him moving, "Wait don't mov-", he began but he pulsed mid-sentence, his mouth open, tasting the air.

"We're got a Thunderclan cat here!", he howled, his paws plugging into bramble pile, blindly swiping with unsheltered claws, trying to find her. More paws came down, trying to get her out. Mapleshade felt like a helpless mole trapped within it's home. Using her head like a stag's horns, she forced her way through the undergrowth, in a random direction, sharp thorns threatening to scrap against her eyes. Reedshine's kit whimpered in pain and confusion.

Opening her eyes again, she wasn't amongst brambles or ferns anymore, instead, long reeds towered above her, realizing she'd managed to break through the Nursery into the reed patch beyond. Able to properly stand now, she immediately broke into a run, desperately trying to get away, relieved to leave the Riverclan camp behind. The fresh bite mark left the Riverclan camp, struck Mapleshade with a wave of pain. Abruptly, the kit in her teeth started whaling out in fright, "Mama! Mama!".

Somewhere far behind her, hidden behind the wall of grass, Reedshine screamed out, "They've got Shykit!".

Mousebung! Mapleshade wanted to curse aloud. Swerving to the side, Mapleshade broke out into the open, the border in the far distance. Strangely, there was dreadful burning in her chest as if a fire blazed in it. Her muscles boiling and throat raw with panting. What was wrong with her? A moon ago this would have been as easy as catching a mouse! Yet, the question remained, how was she going to get there? There wasn't a route Mapleshade could go without going into water and marsh, giving them the advantage. However, Mapleshade was forced to choose, as Reedshine broke through the same reed patch, more furious than any badger, her eyes wild. "Get back here!", she screeched like a crow, "Thief!".

Forced to make choice, unable to think in time, Mapleshade found herself trudging through the slimy mud of the marsh, almost green. Soon, it was up to her belly, the disgusting oily texture seeping into her fur, down to the skin, every huge step a battle in itself. Her few scraps of energy slowly being brained. Somehow, instead of slowing sinking into the mud like a pebble-like the clumpy Thunderclan cat was, Reedshine managed to stay on the surface, lightly skipping over it, as if she had fins for paws. The mossy shoreline was just in reach now, just a bit further but Reedshine was closing in with alarming speed. With one last final mighty effort, Mapleshade managed to lunge from the mud to the mossy dry land, landing awkwardly, Shykit knocked from her grasp. Laying on her side, she heavily gasped for air, lunges aching. She wanted to tear her own ears off for her weakness. Get up!

Rapidly, Reedshine joined Mapleshade, clambering up the bank. "I don't know what you're trying to do, Mapleshade, but it won't

work.", she spat into Mapleshade's ear as she strolled passed her, "Not with me.".

Realising Reedshine was reaching towards Skykit, Mapleshade's paw swept in, her claws up against the kit's throat. "You wouldn't dare!", Reedshine gasped, instantly freezing up, stumbling back. The snobby confidence completely drained. Mapleshade licked her lips nervously, shuffling around until she stood directly above Shykit. The kit still blissfully unaware of harsh reality around her. Spotting Riverclan cats speeding towards them in the distance, Mapleshade decided to make this quick, disappointed she could meddle with the cat who stolen Appledusk's heart from her.

"This is how it's going to work from now on, Reedshine. This kit is mine. And if I ever catch a glimpse of you again, even from a distance, I'll kill Shykit on the spot.", Mapleshade threatened. The husk that stood in front of her seemed completely lifeless like cold stood, as Reedshine stared blankly at her with dead eyes. With the Riverclan patrol within a few tree-lengths of her, yowling their heads off, Mapleshade didn't bother waiting for Reedshine's reply, as her thorn claws flexed closer to Shykit's soft flesh, "And that goes for any Riverclan friend of yours.".

Still unresponsive, Mapleshade continued to drive the sharp tips of her talons into Shykit's neck, making her scream, "I'm waiting.", Mapleshade warned.

"Reedshine, what you doing? Attack her!", Eeltail called out to her clanmate as she rushed toward them with the other warriors. Life suddenly seemed to be breathed into the she-cat, the empty glaze over her eyes melting like ice to flare up to raw panic. Just as the Warriors slivered out of the marsh, leaving a sticky trail of mud, Reedshine brutally whipped around, facing the patrol, "*Stop!*", her voice so loud it caused the air to crack. The Patrol immediately halted to the Queen's orders, bewildered. A wall now between her and her death, Mapleshade snatched up Shykit, limping away: half-dazed, ears ringing, heart straining, fur ruffling, muscles tearing, bones cracking.

From behind her, Splashfoot called out to her, "Hey!", probably rushing after her, Mapleshade not even bothering to check with a

glance over the shoulder. Then, there was a sharp whelp as someone crashed into him, hissing as they rolled on the ground. "You can't!", Reedshine growled, "She'll kill my kit if we go after her!".

Mapleshade smirked as she drowsy staggered away, breathless. Reedshine doing all the dirty work for her. Shykit squirmed and twisted frantically, trying to escape her captive's grasp, letting off confusion mews but none worked. There was nothing the tiny kit could do now. She belonged Mapleshade. And she had a lot planned for this small bundle of fur, a glorious future. Killing off the cats, Larchpaw had failed to, getting rightful justice for unpunished horrors of the Clans.

"You filthy foxheart!", Eletail's enraged yowl echoed in the far distance, "You'll die for this! You hear me?! You'll die!". Grateful, Mapleshade took a wide step over the scent marks, now a free of the Riverclan danger for awhile. A bittersweet victory at last.

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Mapleshade didn't know how far she walked by now, only one thing in her hollow mind, get away, get away-

All she knew, for now, were nameless tall trees towering above, like long outstretching arms, continuing in their pointless and impossible mission to touch the empty black void of the night sky. Devoid of stars. She was in some kind of narrow stripe of woodland, trapped between two Thunderpaths, the Monster's roars echoing among the trunks, making the whole place violently shake. The atmosphere was denser here, more like thick smog then sharp clear air. Like having a piece of crow-food constantly up against her nose. Even if she was panicked, why did she have to choose this of all place?

Without even realizing it, Mapleshade found herself swaying as she plodded away, uncontrollably, until she toppled over like a snapping trunk, collapsing into a patch of thorns. Shykit whimpering in pain. The sharps edges dug deep into Mapleshade filthy coat, ragged with scars and grimy with dried mud still clinging to it like leeches. Yet Mapleshade didn't care anymore, she

was numb to the pain. She felt pain so often, it was almost like second nature to her now. Almost impossible to live without.

Wrapping her tail around Shykit, Mapleshade's head drooped against the sharp steams and leaves, on a nest of thorns. Praying to Starclan, to just let a dreamless sleep take her this one night. But it didn't come. Mapleshade's burning red-amber eyes snapped open as Shykit began to call out in the chilling night air, "Mummy! Mummy!"-

Mapleshade stared into nothingness. Knowing with hanging drain, this was going to be a very- very long night...

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Mapleshade burst from the drifting in void of emptiness, snapping her head back, her senses coming to life. When did she fall asleep? The air was damp and crisp from the freshly melted frost, now one with the earth. Pale sunlight turned the tips of her ginger fur a fiery red, managing to break through a newly settled overcast. Hanging low in the sky, it was unclear on whether it was thick vapour or thin fog. Sharp pains covered her body as the thorn dug into her skin like claws. Why did she have to collapse into thorn bush of all plants? Groaning miserably as she sluggishly crawled out from them, half-dazed. Instead of settling on the dead leaves and twigs of the muddy woodland floor. Serval undesirable pieces of two-legs trash dumped around the place, tainting the lush beauty of nature, with dull black and greys.

What time was it anyway? Strangely humid. Lazily blinking up to the sky, Mapleshade hissed to herself when she released the giant orange eye of the sun was already far above the horizon, edging towards the centre of the dim sky. It was sunhigh already!

As the awareness of her surroundings soon grew, hunger gripped her belly, her stomach in knots as if it was trying to eat itself. Her muzzle screwed up when rotten scent crawled into her nostrils. Following her nose, she tracked the rancid scent to an open gash in her leg. Still hanging open like a cave entrance, the oily yellow liquid had formed around the rims of the upturned fur and muscle. Was it infected? Bile boiled up in her throat. Disgusting. Biting

down, she tore the crust off from the wound, taking a bit of dead skin with it, quickly burying among the leaves. Hopefully, this time her body would get hold of itself and heal her properly. Sighing, Mapleshade shuffled around as she lay there.

Then, small exhausted whimpering sounds came from behind her, as Mapleshade found Shykit tightly tangled among the thorns, upside down. The brown kit must have attempted to clamber away while she slumbered. "Stupid kit.", Mapleshade muttered, as she gripped her sleek tail like worm, roughly yanking out of the thorn. Shykit squeaked as she fell, Mapleshade hurriedly catching her, trapping her between her front paws. The kit was breathless for a heartbeat, as she tried getting hold of herself.

As Mapleshade tightly held the helpless kit, a strange feeling came over her, something she hadn't kept in such a long time. Knowing, the kit's life was in her paws, Shykit was defenceless, Mapleshade could easily snap her neck right now. Like a piece of prey. This kit was useless, she couldn't fight or hunt, all she did was play and take up milk. Yet Mapleshade was reasonable for protecting this warm scrap of fur against the cruel outside world. And she would. She had to, she'd sacrificed fur and tail to get her out of the protective wall of that camp.

Shykit blinked up at her with large round innocent kit-eyes, more curious than fearful like a grown-cat would, "Where's my home? Where's Mummy?", she mewed with a high-pitched voice. "This is your home. And I am your mother.", Mapleshade giving a simple answer to the simple questions. There was a pause as the kit's tiny brain struggled to process it, "You're Mummy?", she gasped, "But isn't Reedshine Mummy too? How can I have two mummies?".

Mapleshade shook her head, "Reedshine isn't your mother. I'm your mother, Reedshine stole you from me.".

Once again, Mapleshade had to wait as her words tried to get through Shykit's thick skull.

"Steal? Is that the bad thing Applekit once did, when he took my moss ball? He was told off for it. Did Mummy do that bad thing? Mummy stole me from you, like Applekit did to my moss ball?".

Sighing, Mapleshade felt the intelligence being drained from her as she forced to downgrade her words in order to communicate with the kit. "Yes.", Mapleshade finally answered, "Just like that. She stole you from me, your real mother.".

Shykit began fidgeting in Mapleshade's paws, becoming agitated, "But I don't remember you.", the cream she-cat pointed out, confusion tinting in her bright green eyes like lush lime leaves in Newleaf. "No, you wouldn't.", Mapleshade tried explaining, "Riverclan stole you from me when you were very young, just after your birth. Do you remember being born?.".

Quickly, Shykit overdramatically shook her head side to side, almost violently. "Exactly. You were too young to remember.", Mapleshade noded down to her, faking a soft purr and a beaming smile brighter than sunlight. Shykit's long white whiskers twitched, unsure of anything, "If you're Mummy, then who's Daddy?", Shykit questioned through narrowed eyelids. Mapleshade bit down a hiss of annoyance, thinking she had earned her new daughter's trust for a heartbeat. There's a moment of silence as Mapleshade thought carefully on her next few words. Would she allow that traitorous snakeheart to be the father of any more of her kits? Yet if she made someone up, it causes Shykit to ask even more questions. So Mapleshade decided to ask Shykit a question of her own.

"Who did Reedshine say your father was?", Mapleshade asked, her voice quiet and gentle, imagining Patchpaw's calico pelt washing over Shykit's brown one, at a time when he was smaller and younger, a time when she could call him her son. At least now, she had someone else for that. "A tom named Appledusk. But he was sent away for a bad thing before I could meet him. Reedshine said it wasn't his fault though.". Mapleshade couldn't help but smirk to herself. Of course, Reedshine would say that, pathetically prancing after her handsome tom. She bet Appledusk could kill all the cats in Riverclan and Reedshine would still rush to his defence whenever someone dares insult him. But that wasn't why Mapleshade chooses him to be the father of her kits, she chooses him because she saw both the caring and powerful cat inside him, who could stand for those he loved and himself.

Just then, Shykit's abrupt words broke into Mapleshade's thoughts,

"What you smiling about?". Hurriedly, Mapleshade shakes the stupid smirk from her face, turning down to Shykit again, "N-nothing.", she uttered. Any grown cat could have seen past her obvious lie but Shykit accepted it without a second thought, nodding. Mapleshade started up again, "Well, it's true.", she mewed, "Appledusk is still your father. Reedshine stole you from me for that. She was jealous, she loved Appledusk too.".

Strangely, Shykit began shredding the leaves with her small claws, fur bristling, "That's a mean thing to do!", she exclaimed, "You can't steal a kit from their mummy!". Grabbing her chance to really get into the kit's while she briefly on Mapleshade's side, Mapleshade nodded, "Yes, it is a mean thing to do. Reedshine isn't a good cat, Shykit. She's a liar and thief.". This made Shykit freeze up, pain making her chest puff up, "B-but she always seemed so nice. She would give us milk and sleep with us. Maybe you're just made a mistake and she is nice.", she mumbled, still hopeful.

There was a stab of annoyance as Mapleshade's patience was quickly running out. Why wasn't she just accepting what she said? How long would it take her to convince this kit she was her real mother?

Chapter 18

Mapleshade had given up, letting the exhausted kit sleep in her paws. Still, in the shelter of the bush, she wondered if she travelled far enough to escape Riverclan. She'd hid her scent, but those slippery cats might find another way to track her down. Her paranoid were proven to be true - A sudden rustling sounds from between the trees, somewhere off into the distance. Pricking her ears, Mapleshade made out a faint creaking as something heavy was being dragged along the floor, crunching the leaves below it.

Two unmistakable scents meet her nose, the musty scent of some kittypet or loner and the grassy scent of the fresh oak forest of a Thunderclan cat, a signal one. Alone. What was a Thunderclan cat doing out here alone? Unless it was that one. About time he showed up.

Cutting their conversation short, Mapleshade hurriedly shoved Shykit into nearby ferns, withered and brown with decay. "What's happening?", the kit gasped, the roots twisting around her paws. Mapleshade's jaw went up against her ear, splitting into it, "There are bad cats around.", she warned harshly, "So don't move a mouse-length from those ferns or I'll have your fur!". Worryingly, Shykit didn't seem to understand a word of what she was saying, staring up at her with a dumbstruck expression. She began to open her mouth to speak, but Mapleshade slapped her tail over it, "Shut up!", Mapleshade growled, "Don't move. You hear that? Don't move!", she repeated.

With that out the way, Mapleshade left Shykit behind, just silently praying she'd do as she was told. For both hers and Mapleshade's safety. Falling into a crouch, she carefully picked her way towards the source of the sound, avoiding any sharp two-leg objects. As Mapleshade crept through the dry undergrowth, there was a large

dip in the earth, forming a shallow pit.

Peering through the jungle of stalks and branches, Mapleshade's heart lunged as she spotted the sleek cream and brown tom at the bottom of the slope, neatly perched on a log, his back to her. The other cat she'd scented earlier nowhere in sight. But she didn't care. Her head now bursting with emotions of excitement and fear, like an apprentice going into the dangers of the battle for the first time.

Keeping her paws and breathing light, she left the shelter of the thicket into the clearing beyond, gradually edging towards Bloomheart, using every scrap of skill and experience to get this right. Now in the open, her only hope was that he didn't turn around- "I know you're there.", Bloomheart called out to her, with a silky smooth voice, strangely calm. Foxdung! Going for broke, Mapleshade lunged into the air, outstretching her paws as she aimed for Bloomheart's throat. Seeing it coming, Bloomheart effortlessly darted to the side in a flash of brown, leaving Mapleshade nothing to land on but hard rotting wood, winding her.

"I've been waiting for you.", he suddenly mewed from behind her. How did he get there so quick?! Whirling round, Mapleshade gripped the log, using it to propel herself forward. Yet again, almost lazily, Bloomheart stepped backwards, causing Mapleshade to stumble, eating dirt on her way down. Furious, Mapleshade scrambled off her side, sending waves of paws swipes in his direction. Through, they never met their target, Bloomheart constantly moving, his throat just always out of reach. Eventually, Mapleshade's body couldn't take it, crumbling to the floor, desperately gushing for air. How was he so fast? Or- why was she so slow?

A fox-length away, Bloomheart patiently waited, casually washing his front paw. Fighting her own body, Mapleshade forced it to stand again, stumbling towards Bloomheart, hissing. Finally, Bloomheart took notice of her, tucking his paws in as he sat, "Don't be a fool, Mapleshade. Even an apprentice could kill you with the condition you're in.".

Her fury was boiling to the surface. What was this cat playing at? After she'd killed his mate, he hadn't gone after any of her kits just

laying around. And here she was, ready for slaughter and he still refused to take the perfect opportunity right in his face. "What are you waiting for?", she snapped, "Kill me!". Before going after him, jaws snapping. Bloomheart stayed where he was, "I was going to-", he mumbled, leaping away as Mapleshade got too close, "But if I did that, that mate of yours might go after me or even my kin. So why give him the excuse?", he mewed somewhere behind her.

If there was one thing Bloomheart didn't know, it was her former mate. Appledusk wouldn't know how to avenge someone even if he tried. Revenge was to make the cat suffer, death would be mercy. Only through the death of their loved ones could they be truly punished.

Spinning around, Mapleshade claws flexed against the ground, frustration growing, desperately to tear flesh. Bloomheart continued, "I sacrificed tooth and claw to kill off every filthy cat I could get my paws on in the name of the code. Yet here I am- half blind, exiled and dead mate.", he then turned to Mapleshade with his murky blind eye eerily devoid of emotion, "No one cares about us, Mapleshade. All they want to see is our mangled corpses.".

Not in the mood to hear it, Mapleshade tried kicking out, in an attempt to trip him up. However, with alarming speed, he raised his paw, bringing it back down, pinning Mapleshade's leg in place, not even needing to shelter his claws. Like a deer, Bloomheart leapt over her head, into her blind spot. Suddenly, she felt a looming presence as Bloomheart stood above her, Mapleshade flinched in disgust as she felt his hot breath borrowing inside her ear, like an echoing voice inside her head, "Even Starclan doesn't care.", he whispered, "And if Starclan doesn't want us, where do you think we'll go, Mapleshade?".

Gathering her strength, Mapleshade lashed out with both tooth and claw, managing to skim the edges of Bloomheart's fur as he retreated. "Shut up and fight me, mouseheart!", she demanded, baring her fangs. Her only response was the unblinking cold gaze. Her anger snapping, Mapleshade sent wave after wave of attacks at him but always keeping the distance between them, not a single blow landing.

When she rushed left, he darted right, when she sprang up, he dived low, like dancing fireflies. Eventually, exhaustion got the better of her for the second time in a row, slumping against the log. Circling her, Bloomheart began questioning her, "By some miracle, you actually manage to kill me, who do you plan to go after when I'm dead?".

Slowly, Mapleshade's aching lunges gained control, slowed her breathing. "Killing Oakstar!", she screeched like an owl, her voice cracking, pouring all her hatred and bloodthirst into it. Bloomheart's whiskers twitched and long-tail swung, "And how do you plan to do that? He's got eight lives with an entire clan to protect him. While you're alone with one life.".

Using the log to steady herself as she got up, Mapleshade narrowed her eyes at him, "I'll figure something out, I always do.", she muttered bitterly.

He started to pace around her, his tail dragging across the floor, "So let's just say, you do somehow kill him. What then? Who's your next target? Bloomheart? Deerdapple? Do you kill every Clan cat? Once you bring down the entire forest, do you go after kittypets and rouges?", not stopping with the endless questions. Finally having enough, Mapleshade snapped at him, "Stop rambling and make your point already!", she demanded.

Then, Bloomheart halted, his back to her, sighing. Slowly, he turned to her, face deadly serious, "Without alliance to the code, killing has become pointless. All I can do now is to protect those who are still alive. And It seems to me, that you got the idea that it's fine to start dragging my kin into this.", he mewed, flexing claws against the leaves, "Dawnfeather already dead because of you.".

"And how is that not fair?", Mapleshade pointed out, baffled, "You went after mine, so I went after yours.".

Bloomheart's shoulders drooped, as he'd been defeated by life itself, "I think we can both agree that kin is the only thing we have left anymore. So I'm willing to make a deal.".

Mapleshade left the support of the log, taking gradual and painful

steps towards the cat she'd swore to kill all those moons ago. As she approached she expected him to move away, but surprisingly he didn't, determined to stand his ground now. "What foxdung is this?", she hissed in his face, so close, his whiskering touching her muzzle. Though Bloomheart was unmoving, not even the slightest twitch or sign of fear, like a cold hard dead stone. "It simple.", he uttered in an icy cold voice, staring her right down into her core, "We leave each other and our kins alone. I stay away from your kits and you stay away from mine.". Like an out of control kit, Mapleshade couldn't help but burst into a fit of amused purring.

"Complete foxdung!", she sniggered, "You're more mousebrained then I thought, to think I'll let you go.". At this, Bloomheart off another sigh, disappointed. Mapleshade's chest tightened up, her anger being forced to her limits, on the verge of trying to tear him to pieces once again. "I expected you wouldn't be satisfied with the terms. So I'm willing to make a compromise.".

With that, Bloomheart suddenly whipped around, beginning to wander off somewhere. Without his focusing, Mapleshade was about to spring onto his back and snap his neck, but curiosity made her stop in her tracks. Instead of leaving the clearing as she expected, Bloomheart's narrow head plunged into the nearby thicket, grabbing something large and hairy.

Dragging her by the scruff, Bloomheart roughly pulled out the loner she'd scent earlier, half-conscious. A large pure white she-cat, grey specks on her muzzle from old age, her fur tangled with dead shrubbery and dried blood. Mapleshade blinked, confused. Wincing slightly, when Mapleshade noticed the deep bite marks covering the loner's legs, rendering them useless without causing a storm of unimaginable torture. Completely at Bloomheart's mercy. He placed a single paw on his prize, seemly proud, "Recognize her?", he asked slyly.

For awhile Mapleshade could only stare at her blankly, a name or face at tip of her tongue. The white she-cat's eyelids, though still heavy, slowly slid open, relieving rich chestnut brown eyes. The loner's awareness of the world began to form, she frantically searched her surroundings, dazed, like she was waking up from a nightmare. Brown eyes, brown eyes- Mapleshade repeated in her

head, trying to dig through the deepest caverns of her memories in search of this cat. She knew this loner, she swore it. "Who...". She finally muttered, unable to get the words out.

Bloomheart shook his head, "I'm disappointed you don't. How can someone forget the face of their father's killer?".

Immediately, Mapleshade stop moving, her throat and lungs have frozen over with stale ice, suffocating her. Her insides feeling like they could wither and rot away. It was true, all those seasons ago- the same cloudy white pelt- the same brown eyes- it was her, that foxheart that had killed Dullface, her father!

The loner suddenly started panicking under Bloomheart's weight, violently shaking, "I never murdered anyon-". However, Bloomheart instantly shut her up, curling his claws into her open wound, making her scream out in pain. "Silence rouge!", he hissed furiously, his blue eye glazing over, "You have the exact name, pelt colour and age. It has to be you. Look her in the eye and tell me you don't remember her!".

A haunting silence hung as they stared at each other, reading their; emotions, personalities, secrets and crimes. A horror-filled expression slowly creeps over her face, utter terror. "Yo-you're that kitten I once saw.", she barely muttered, now completely lost for words. Mapleshade didn't know anything by that heartbeat. She didn't do what to do, say or act. All knew she could be staring into the drained face, only able to see it seared in Dullface's crimson blood, dripping down her muzzle in thick raindrops.

Bloomheart crept eerily close to the loner, whispering to the loner's ear, hovering over her like a swooping hawk, waiting to snatch her up, "That 'kitten'- was the daughter of the brown tom you threw into a rock pile, splitting his skull open. Sound familiar?", he hissed hatefully like a snake. The trees around seemed to shift and stretch, bending in unnatural ways, like curling talons.

Suddenly; they thicken and bulked up into oaks, the muddy earth now sandy under paw, Bloomheart and her side by side as fellow apprentices, not fellow killers just trying to outdo each other. Amongst Thunderclan territory, laid her father, laying there on his

side, motionless, a pinky bloody pile of organs next to the giant crack in his head, the jagged double-pointed stone stained red. Mapleshade found herself coiling up, in a trance, the world completely blurred like a dazing fog-covered every crack and leaf in the narrow woodland. Feeling like she could plunge into the black void of sleep at any moment.

Barely, she made out the loner's pathetic attempt at begging for her life, "But I didn't mean to kill him! He attacked, so I just tried to-", she moaned but was cut short with Bloomheart gripping her head and slamming it hard into the ground, sealing her jaw shut. "Quit your whining, rat.", he hissed. Steadily, Bloomheart turned his attention to the frozen Mapleshade, "So how about it? I give you, your father's killer and your kits' safety- And you won't touch Nettlebreeze. Deal?".

There wasn't any more to it, what well could she say?

"Deal.", Mapleshade blurted out, unable to form a proper sentence.

Instantly, He kicked the white she-cat hard into the flank, sending her rolling towards Mapleshade. Mapleshade and the loner couldn't take their eyes off of each other, stunned with shock. Bloomheart let off a deep sigh of relief, dipping his head politely to her, "Glad doing business with you.", he commented calmly.

Beginning to ascend up the slope, his long strides making him look like a falcon silently gliding through the trees, searching for unsuspecting prey. Briefly, Mapleshade considered trying to attack him while his guard was downed but stopped herself. Releasing this could be the only chance to finally get the foxheart out of her life, even if he wasn't dead, which admittedly was disappointing. But if this was the next best thing, then so be it.

Just then, there was the loud squeak of delight, echoing through the branches. Alarmingly, Bloomheart twisted round to stare at Mapleshade at the top of the slope with narrowed eyes, silently questioning her. Anger gripped her, "Shykit!", she called out angrily. The tiny kit clambered out of the bushes, right next to Bloomheart, a large pine cone in between her sharp teeth, beaming with excitement. Bloomheart blinked curiously down at her, "And who is

this?", he asked. Shykit blinked back at him, her voice muffled by the cone, "Are you one of the bad cats?", she mewed. Bloomheart's tail tip twitched.

Mapleshade's fur bristled, coming in before anything could get out of hand, "It doesn't matter who.", she called up from below, "She's my kit and that's all you need to know. The terms are agreed on Bloomheart, she has to be protected as well.".

Bloomheart simply shrugged, huffing, "A deal, a deal.", he acknowledged, "I intend to keep it.". Out of nowhere, his face narrow figures tightened up, borderline aggressive, "And I trust you do the same.", he warned, "Remember, you lay a claw on Nettlebreeze and your kits are fair game.". Subtly, he glanced at Shykit for a moment before continuing, "Their deaths will be on your head, Mapleshade. Stay out of my way and I'll say out of yours, it's not hard.".

A wicked grin slide over Mapleshade's lips, "We'll see.".

Bloomheart's lips drew up to bare his fangs, "Just leave us alone.", he growled. There was a movement of stillness as neither cat moved. Finally, Bloomheart stalked into the shelter the trees, the gloom washing over his pelt, his lean frame soon melting into the brown and green background. And just like that, like a wandering shadow with no master, he quietly slipped away without a sound, gone. Shykit shook as if she'd just woken, bounding down the slope to meet her mother. Dropping her prized cone at her small paws, Shykit blinked down at her loner, still paralyzed to her side, who miserably whimpered in hopelessness and groaned in pain. Mapleshade would allow Shykit to stay. She needed to face reality sooner or later, to the reality of murder.

Mapleshade deeply wished Tulipfur could be here to witness the avenge of her long-lost mate. Instead of stashed away behind walls of Thunderclan's camp. Growling to herself, Mapleshade wondered if her mother was even loyal anymore. If her mate or kits couldn't keep a shred of loyalty to their own mother, what hope would Tulipfur have?

It was strange. For all those seasons, Mapleshade had dreamt of the

day she would find Dullface's killer, to finally avenge him. She'd imagined the fiercest and most savage of cats, stronger than a Lionclan warrior, wickeder than a Tigerclan warrior and swifter than a Leopardclan warrior. A cat beyond the most dreadful of nightmares. Yet, that wasn't what she got at all. All she had was a pathetic pile of scruffy white fur, awaiting her own death. At least, she could look at her!

"Look at me!", Mapleshade screeched, hooking her round the ear and dragging her into her face. Disrespectfully, the loner kept in a tight ball, her eyes sealed shut. "I'm sorry.", she softly mumbled, utterly defeated. Sorry? Sorry!? Is that she got? Seasons she had to grow up without a father, never seeing his cheerful grin and cheesy jokes. Her heart pounded as she remembered the warrior who never escaped apprenticeship. The cat she'd never see again because of this loner!

Anger controlling every hair on her body now, Mapleshade exploded into a fit of pure hatred, more than she'd ever felt before. More for Oakstar or even Bloomheart. Frantically, she pounded down at the loner, ripping into her fur, skin, flesh and bone with her razor claws, digging deep down through her body. Desperately, She wanted to the loner's blood-curdling screams, splitting the air itself. Yet she got none. All the response she got was the loner rolling into a ball, even more tightly, like a shrivelling slug, silent.

Letting off the blood-curdling scream herself, Mapleshade gripped the loners' shoulders, violently shaking her. Shykit watched from the background, shut down. Yet still nothing. Erupting in blazing fury, Mapleshade thrashed her against the nearby log like a rabid dog, streams of boiling foam dripping down the sides of her open mouth. As the loner was viciously slammed against the solid wall of bark, a sharp snapping noise painfully pierced her ears like spikes.

Instantly Mapleshade grabbed her again, but now she was unnaturally light, her head flopping backwards. Her neck was broken. Anxiously, Mapleshade shook her again, trying to bring life back into the lifeless body. Was she dead already? Bu-but she wasn't even close to being done with her, this should of a been the beginning of a long process, of agonizing torture, making her suffer through all unbearable pain she made Mapleshade go through all

those seasons. Despite that, all that lay in front of was useless scrap of fur and a traumatized kit.

Unable to accept it, Mapleshade turned crazed, wildly mauling, ripping, tearing, pounding, scratching, biting and clawing at the long-dead cat, not stopping until her front paws become raw, feeling like she could keel over at any moment.

As she crept back to observe her gory mess, the loner now reduced to a bloody pulp, nothing but a strained pile of white and red, the scruff in shreds, patches of crude skin. The face completely slashed out. She was unrecognizable as a cat, let alone the disgusting loner that had taken Dullface from her. Kicking the mangled corpse away in revulsion, she swerved towards Shykit, snatching her up. "Wh-what did you do that poor she-cat?", she stammered as she carried away.

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Patchpaw flattened his ears, trying to block out the embarrassing conversation between his father and local kittypet mother and her kits. Yet, of course, it didn't work. The fellow kit pressed herself against him, their fur brushing, "Forgive Lily.", Molly muttered, "She's just jumpy from after Bloomheart terrorised the local area .". Patchpaw nodded, able to mutually agree the adults were acting more like kits than the actual kits were. At the same time, he didn't blame them either. While Bloomheart didn't kill anyone, he'd been interrogating the local kittypets, making them bleed if necessary. He was apparently searching for an elderly white she-cat, though Patchpaw had no idea who she was.

Trying to distract himself, Patchpaw tried making polite conversation with Molly, the perfect opportunity to find out something he'd wanted to do since the day he was born, "So why don't all kittypets wear collars?", he asked, "Isn't that a kittypet requirement?". Molly made a face before playfully dumping into him, "No, you silly furball.", she chuckled, "If you want to play the stereotype game, why aren't you wearing the pelts of your fallen enemies?".

A dopey grin came onto Patchpaw's lips like it had been slapped on,

purring, "At least we don't eat rabbit droppings!", he exclaimed. Molly got all fours, crouching down, playfully lashing her tail, "At least we don't eat raw meat. Eating all those fur and feathers must be a nightmare!", she insulted. Patchpaw threw the insult back, "Hey, We're not birds. We use the feathers for our bedding.".

Molly gagged, clearly grossed out, "Yuck! You sleep on dead animals.", circling each other. Having enough, Patchpaw let the adoration kick in, launching himself at his new playmate. Though with a surprising skill for a kittypet, Molly was there to meet him, rearing up and catching him. Together, they tousled in the long wiry grass and weeds, squeaking with delight. "Molly!", come to a sharp yap as Lily called out to her denmate. Instantly, they separated, hot with embarrassment. Appledusk and Patchpaw's eyes locked, his father flicking his tail for him to join him. Filled with shame, Patchpaw miserably padded over to his father's side, tail and head drooping. It was only playing. It wasn't hurting anyone, was it?

Appledusk puffed up his chest, now turning to Lily once again, "We're only trying to gather information about Bloomhea-", he explained softly, trying to calm the paranoid queen. "I'm not having it!", she rudely interrupted, snapping from on top of the fence, lashing her specked tail, "That savage has been killing us house cats by the dozens! What makes you Clan cats any different?".

Appledusk's neck fur, stood on end, offended, "We're nothing like that foxheart-".

"Foxheart?", Lily interrupted him again, "Is that another Clan cat I should know about?".

Quickly, Patchpaw spoke up before Appledusk could, determined not to let his father worsen the situation with that big mouth of his. "It's an insult.", Patchpaw calmly explained, "Not a name.". From beside, Molly pricked her ears, her deep blue eyes glittering in curiosity. Though Lily just made an ugly face, confused, "So you can be named after a fox and have 'heart' at the end of your name- but not specifically 'Foxheart'?". Patchpaw nodded. His only response was scoff and roll of the eyes, "Of course.", Lily groaned.

"Thank you for your input, Patchpaw.", Appledusk grumped, "Now if we can please get back on topic-".

"The topic of you leaving.", Lily stated, "I'm not risking Molly safety anymore.". The golden she-cat's suspicious gaze flickered over to Molly, hiding among the overgrown ivy near the wooden fence at the bottom of the garden. The grey and white she-cat stood forward to guard her new friend, "I'm fine, Lily.", the young cat insisted, "He's not dangerous, I would have won that fight if you hadn't stopped us.", she boasted. In your dreams! Patchpaw's paw pads tinged, aching to leap off the ground and start round two.

Though Lily shook her unconvinced, staring hard at her two visitors, "I know what you're really like. You're nothing but glorified rouges, trying to hide your horrid actions under pitiful excuses like 'honour'.". Even Patchpaw couldn't help but be seriously offended by the she-cat's harsh words. But that was nothing compared to Appledusk, who seemed to have one too many nerves struck, looking like he about to lunge at her.

Swiftly, Patchpaw stepped in front of Appledusk, trying to shove him back, though it was no use, like a boulder, he wouldn't budge. "We'll be on our way now.", Patchpaw mewed, dipping his head. Lily seemed to taken back by Patchpaw's politeness, nodding her head in return, "Just make sure to keep yourself safe out there, young one. Though, you'd do well to remove that father of yours.".

Agreed, Patchpaw silently thought in his head as continued to nudge Appledusk from the spot. "Dad.", he snapped up to the large brown tom, "We're leaving.". Appledusk shook his head, waking up from his angered daze. Spinning around, he stomped away in a huff, sulking. Great Starclan, was this cat a warrior or a kit? Glancing over his shoulder, Patchpaw and Molly shared one last flick of the tail in goodbye, before Patchpaw was forced to leave forever.

Following Appledusk, they passed through a giant gaping hole in the bright white fence, that served as an entrance. "Stupid kittypets.", Appledusk cursed to himself, now long out of Lily or Molly's ear range. Leaving behind the massive two-leg nest, larger than the Barn, looming in the distance, a towering figure among the

foreground, putting all trees to shame. Honestly, Patchpaw never knew they could so large until now.

Risking one final peek behind his father back, he spotted an elderly female two-leg strolled out of it, wearing a grey pelt, that hung loosely around its skinny legs, fanning out like a white upside-down flower in blossom. It pasted serval rose bushes edging against a pale gravel path and raised it's right paw, shaking it. Unclear on whether it was a friendly and threatening gesture, Patchpaw could never tell with them.

Tracking their own scent, they retraced their steps, beginning the long journey home. For a while, they travelled in silence as they made good process through the sloping hills, serval clusters of twolegs places dotting the vast landscape, mostly favouring the bottom of swallow valleys. Hopefully, they'd be making it back to the stone gorge by dusk. Finally having enough, Patchpaw decided to break the awkwardness, someone needing to say unwanted truth, "Well, nothing on Bloomheart then.", Patchpaw commented, "Maybe Mum was wrong.".

Appledusk shook his broad head as climbed through the tunnel of vines and roots, "Unlikely.", he pointed out, "Your mother wouldn't have travelled all the way out here just to bluff. Bloomheart already tried killing you and littermates, there's no reason he won't try again.". After Appledusk finished speaking, Patchpaw turned quiet, thoughtful.

When everyone thought Birchface was their father, Bloomheart had always been close to Mapleshade's family. He'd been her former mentor after all. He even visited them in Nursery from time to time, watching them like a father, being reminding of his own son, Nettlepaw. Since he lost his daughter, Flowerpaw, he might have been projecting his grief onto them.

"When he becomes so obsessed with Starclan and the Code? He wasn't so extreme when he lived in Thunderclan.", Patchpaw accidentally blurted out his thoughts. Ahead of him, Appledusk shrugged, "Bloomheart was always a strong believer in that, I won't lie. But after the accident with Flowerpaw, it was interwoven with his personal revenge on me and Mapleshade. He's just using

Starclan as an excuse, maybe even to himself. By this point, I think he's forgotten why he's even doing it. He and Mapleshade are tearing into each other for the sake of it. I don't know if there's a way out for them.".

With that, Appledusk paced ahead, exiting the hedgerows, into the open field of tall grasses swishing in the gentle breeze, leaving Patchpaw lagging behind while deep in thought. Thinking about it, Bloomheart had failed to save Mapleshade's father when she was an apprentice. He had vowed to protect her in her father's place and others like her - But then he failed with his own daughter. His vow to protect everyone slowly warped and became illogical, until he turned on Mapleshade herself.

A cold shiver was sent down his spine like an icy night wind, remembering the look in Bloomheart's eyes as him, Petalkit and Larchkit were dragged out of camp, the utter sense of betrayal. Mapleshade, who's father was killed by an outsider, had hypocritically mated with a Riverclan cat. She'd gone against the life lesson he'd sent moons teaching.

Bloomheart had the strongest heritage in the forest, the blood of a leader and deputy surging through his veins. And here come Mapleshade, the cat he thought he could trust, threatening to corrupt the purest blood of the whole clans. Remembering the briefest of moments, when Petalkit jokily mentioned how handsome Nettlepaw was. And if the union of Bloomheart's kin and Mapleshade's kin ever come to light, that pureblood would be tainted.

Patchpaw's fur turned hot with anger, disgusted how he could do something like that. He'd once looked at down at them like they were his own kits, but all it took was one truth to come out, one heartbeat, for him to let that come crashing down. To make it his life goal to kill them.

Just then, his mind naturally shifted to his mother, remembering her shredded and ragged pelt, hanging loosely around her frail frame. Every bone sticking out like a spike as if they could burst out at any moment. Every mouse-length of her body crisscrossed with long pale pink scars and deep open wounds that had been freshly

added to the collection. "I'm really worried Mum.", Patchpaw admitted, "She seemed really thin when we saw her.", falling into step alongside Appledusk, as they strolled up to one of the narrow sandy paths that came in an identical pair, well worn by twolegs and their farm monsters.

Appledusk sighed, "I think you're right. If she goes the way she is now, there's no way she's going to last till Newleaf. Despite how much I'll hate to do this- We might have to track her down and convince her to stay with us for a while.".

"And if she refuses?".

"Then there's no more we can do for her. She'd be on her own.".

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Finally, just as the sun's tip skimmed the edge of the horizon, the welcoming sound of gushing water meet Patchpaw's large ears. Rushing ahead of Appledusk, Patchpaw glanced the gorge river in distance, nothing but a blue line in the landscape. Excitement gripping him, Patchpaw leapt down the hillside like a fawn experiencing the wonders of the world for the first time. "Slow down!", Appledusk called after him, being left in the dust.

However, Patchpaw's quickly lost his footing on the loose stones, slipping and tumbling down like a moss ball. He squealed as the world span around him, spinning, whirling, twisting- Suddenly, the breath was knocked out the young cat as he hit a solid wall of fur and bone, making the other cat stagger back.

At first, while he still gathered his bearings, Patchpaw assumed the bulky grey tom in front of him was a farm cat. But was instantly proven wrong as Riverclan overpowered his senses. Patchpaw flinched back, now defensive. The Riverclan cat's face lit up in relief, "Finally.", he exclaimed, "The little runt himself. I found him!", calling out to someone off into the distance. Then, a familiar orange she-cat stepped out from behind a dense clump of scrubs and weeds, blinking down at the kit. "Reedshine?", he gasped.

"Patchkit, thank goodness it's you. You've really grown since I last

saw you.", she smiled. Patchpaw puffed up his chest up proudly, trying to make himself look larger, "It's Patchpaw now.".

"So rouges are having naming ceremonies now?", the grey tom mocked coldly behind Reedshine. Surprisingly, Reedshine whirled around, cuffing him over the ear and hissing, "Hush, Splashheart.", she warned, before slowly turning to Patchpaw again, "Forgive my apprentice, he's a minnowbrain. Now, this is a very important Patchpaw, where is your father?"

Before he could respond, another voice cried out her name from on top of the hill, "Reedshine!" , Appledusk called out, racing to meet them. The two threw themselves at each other into a storm of rattling purring and soppy snuggling that made Patchpaw want to be sick. Splashheart next to him seemed equally disturbed.

At last, Appledusk stepped away, the happiness draining from his face slightly as he noticed his former clanmate, "Splashheart.", Appledusk acknowledged, dipping his head. He only got a slightest of reactions, getting the subtlest nod of the head, stiff and awkward, tail twitching. Clearly, the young warrior was unnerved around the traitor and half-clan kit. Though admittedly, after Patchpaw had yelled at and even try to be murdered for his heritage, he could easily ignore it. Even slightly grateful.

Appledusk then turned serious, "What are you doing out here?", he questioned. Something painful seemed to hold Reedshine back, so Splashheart spoke on her behalf, "You weren't involved in the fox attack on Riverclan camp last night, were you?", he asked through narrowed amber eyes. The pounding of Patchpaw's heart quicken, not liking where this was going, just hoping no one was seriously hurt. Appledusk's ears flattened, "I wasn't even aware. What happened?"

"Mapleshade lured two foxes into camp, which cost Spiketail his life. She then ended kidnapping Shykit.", he explained coldly, clear bitterness in his words. At first, Patchpaw thought he was talking about someone else, the name Mapleshade, sounding like the name of a stranger. The actions not going with the cat, Patchpaw unable to make the connection in his brain. Then it clicked.

Neither Appledusk nor Patchpaw could move for a heartbeat, speechless. Again? Patchpaw thought, horrid. How many more cats was she going to kill? But what he understood the least was her stealing Shykit, the tiny kit that Appledusk had named himself. Why would she steal his little sister like that? She needed to be in Riverclan, safe in the Nursery!

Next to him, Appledusk's fur sparked up as if he'd been struck by a massive light bolt, foaming with anger. "That foxheart-", he growled, "And to think I once loved her- What is she doing with my kit?!".

Suddenly, Reedshine managed to get hold of herself, darting forward, standing directly in front of Appledusk, "And that's not worst of it!", she hissed in his face, "That mate of yours threatened to slice Shykit's throat if any Riverclan cat goes after her.".

All Patchpaw's insides turned to stone, unable to believe any of the words around him, his mind numb. Vaguely, he hoped this was a dream. But of course, it wasn't.

"Please Appledusk.", Reedshine begged, "You and her kits are the only ones that talk sense into her. You're the only ones who can save our daughter.". Time seemed to freeze up, as nobody dared move. Then new cold ice of bitterness seemed to form over Appledusk as he nodded, dead inside, "I will.", he mewed emotionless. Without another word, Appledusk twisted round, going back the way he comes, flicking his long cream tail, signalling for Patchpaw to follow. Joining him, Patchpaw began panting with nervousness, "Where are we going?", he questioned.

"To the Barn.", Appledusk confirmed, "Your sister could be the only one who knows where your mother is.".

Chapter 19

Scrunching up her eyes and tasting the air, Mapleshade's ear tips tinged with joy, finally detecting life among the dead forest. Like her hazy mind, on all sides of her lay a dense white wall of fog, swirling around, enclosing her in. Only the blurry black shapes of looming giant trees gave her any bearings of her surroundings. Then she spotted the movement of a shrew as it ruffed through the rotting ferns. Luckily, Mapleshade stood downwind of the tiny creature, unaware of the presence of its own death. Tearing through the bramble, Mapleshade launched herself with all the speed she could muster, straight for the scrawny shrew. Yet, like the previous two times, her body betrayed her as her spin snapped awkwardly, falling short of her prey by a rabbit hop, clumsy stumbling, biting her tongue as her nose met the ground. As soon as the shrew spotted the massive grumbling mass of fur, it shot into the thicket like a lightning bolt, instantly lost to the green gloom.

Rolling onto her stomach, Mapleshade ripped at the layers of mushy shrivelled leaves, scattering them in the fierce gale, ruffling her fur like swishing grass. Frustration boiling up, she let off deafening yowl. Instantly regretting it as the cry rattled through the canopy, probably scaring off any nearby prey. Adding to her problems, Mapleshade was forced to let off another wave of raspy coughs from her aching throat. Struggling to stand, she reluctantly stuck her muzzle to the damp earth, beginning to a long search for scarce prey all over again. Mapleshade checked in bushes, under roots, between tree trunks, and over logs, yet no prey steered amongst the dull lifeless forest, hanging bare of leaves. Or was there?

Pricking her ears, she made out a faint nibbling, of jagged teeth against hard bark. Setting off, Mapleshade found her prey amongst a built up a pile of twoleg trash, rusty and grey. Though this wasn't the scrawny prey she'd hoped for, it was something much deadlier. What Mapleshade feared, like a massive mouse, it's dark brown fur was wiry and scruffy, two solid white blocks for teeth, ready for dashing and it reeked of grime. The rat scurried across the floor

with alarming speed, as it poked its narrow twitching nose into every nook and cranny it could find. It had no colour in its eyes, just large black lifeless voids. A rush of nerves spread through her. Could she fight this hideous thing?

Yet, starvation drove her on. Without even ordering herself to do so, Mapleshade rushed forward, hooking the bony rat by its a scaley tail, trying to force it into her snapping jaws. Letting off a shriek of fear. But the rat wouldn't let itself be swallowed up by the gaping mouth. Twisting in mid-air, it gnawed deep into Mapleshade's muzzle. Bursting with pain, she frantically thrashed her head, trying to get the pest off. But it kept latched on, like a leach, going deeper and deeper.

Eventually, Mapleshade reached up with a paw, gripping it's neck with claws and flinging it away. Mapleshade huddled up, panicked and stunned. Red oozing from the tip of her nose. Instead of grabbing the chance to run away, now lustful for revenge, the rat tore towards her. Forced on the defensive, Mapleshade flailed her paws in random directions, desperately trying to keep the rat's cracked fangs away from her soft flesh.

For a heartbeat, her prey was out of sight. Where was it? Then there was a sudden stab of agony in her left back leg. Flicking around, her paws swooped in, using all her weight to pin it down, crushing it. It wriggled like a worm, in an attempt to get free. Not giving it that chance, Mapleshade ripped through its windpipe like a leaf, tasting its warm blood on her tongue. Greedily, she licked it from her lips, finally having something to feast upon.

Yet, it wasn't without consequences. Two new sets of wounds now opened up, deep teeth marks, leaking scarlet. While the injuries she'd gained from the Thunderclan patrol had barely begun to close up, the crusty yellow slim had returned, but now with limey green, decaying from sickness. Mapleshade had attempted to seal it shut with cod webs, the only herb she knew, though it seemed to be borderline useless. Sighing, Mapleshade scooped up the limp body, dropping in her grasp and limped back to Shykit.

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As soon as Mapleshade emerged from the brown and green cover, Shykit immediately rushed towards her and started complaining, "Do you have any milk yet? I'm hungry!".

Mapleshade sniffed at her belly, but nothing seemed to have changed. "Stop being impatient! I can't start producing milk again overnight, you know.".

"But Reedshine had mil-".

"Shut up about that she-cat!", Mapleshade hissed hatefully at the tiny pale kit, "She is not your mother, I am!".

After a long awkward pause, Mapleshade shoved the oversized prey into Shykit's face. "Here.", Mapleshade grumbled, "You'll have to do with this instead.". Another moment past with Shykit just blinked at the nasty looking rat that was larger then she was. "I'm not ready for fresh-kill yet.", she mewed, confused. Mapleshade scoffed, "Tough! It's either this or nothing.".

Swallowing, Shykit slowly edged towards the lanky thing. Gripping a clump of fur between her kit teeth, no larger than seeds, she furiously tugged at its rough pelt, but could do nothing to get to the fresh meat that lay below. Growing impatient, Mapleshade snatched it from her grasp, tearing it open with a single bite. Stripping some muscle from the bone, Mapleshade placed the small pile of raw meat at Shykit's paws, before wandering off with the rest of the rat herself. Settling on a bare patch of sandy soil, Mapleshade scoffed down her meal, not caring for its salty taste or chewy texture. Finally filling the hollow feeling in her stomach, that had been there for far too long.

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Mapleshade was glad to leave that horrid woodland behind, far too close to the twoplace for her liking. Even if the air was finally crisp and fresh, Mapleshade couldn't enjoy it's taste, her lungs too clogged up with spider webs of sickness. Her lips twitched as she silently muttered bitter words. Irritatingly, her mouth burned as more sour coughs gushed out.

"My legs are tired!", Shykit yowled behind, climbing from under a stake of rotten logs, now crawling on her stomach like a slug. Instantly Mapleshade span round in disgust, "You pathetic runt!", she snarled, teeth on display, "I've already stopped twice for you and now you want another break?". She questioned the kits fiercely, jagging her in the chest.

The kit swallowed nervously before answering, "But it's really far!", she protested, "And you're going too fast.". Anger snapping, Mapleshade raised her paw, claws out, about to bring it down on the unsuspecting kit. Forcing herself to stop, she tightly strained her muscles, desperately needing to remember this wasn't Larchkit- or probably Larchpaw now. He was 5 moons while this furball was only 1, more delicate than a feather in a gale. Any expensive force, even what grown cats would consider a light tap, could kill her within a heartbeat. Instead, Mapleshade turned her storm of rage on the nearby spindly tree, looking like the gentlest breeze could snap it.

Finding a loose piece of bark, Mapleshade furiously pounded at it, until she hacked it clean off.

"Fine- have your extra breaks.", Mapleshade puffed, struggling to get control of her rasping pants, "But that's not an excuse to slack off. If we're not going to get as much travelling done, you have to make it up with training.".

Gripping the bark underfoot, Mapleshade chucked it to the kits' paws, who only blinked at it. "Pounce on it.", Mapleshade ordered, sitting down, watching intensely. Reacting quickly, the kit shuffled back, creating distance between her and her wooden prey. Bending her legs, Shykit edged towards in a half-crouch, her paws heavy and clumsy, tail swishing, ruffing the leaves behind her. Her belly wasn't skidding the ground. Every mistake that could possibly be made. Bursting from sitting position, Mapleshade stalked over to Shykit. Before she could even lunge into the air, Mapleshade scooped her up with a paw, setting her aside.

"Not even close!", Mapleshade hissed, falling into hunting crouch herself, tail tucked in and weight spread evenly apart. Signalling with her tail, Shykit warily joined the Queen's side, doing her best

to copy. Her tail lashed. "Stop moving the tail.", Mapleshade scoffed, Which Shykit did, but clearly using every bit of discipline and energy, to restrain her excitement. Well, it was better than last time at least, but Shykit still crept forward with the feet of a duck, swaying slightly. That Riverclan influence still strongly burnt into her.

Mapleshade stomped down hard on the brown she-cat's tail like a pesky ant, causing her to halt and squeak in pain. "If you insist at failing every time, I'll just do it myself.", Mapleshade sneered, shoving the bewildered kit aside with her back leg, preparing to make the leap herself. Focusing her piercing amber eyes on a scrap of wood, Mapleshade glided over the ground like a silent vapour, making quick yet steady process. Only within a fox-length now. Gripping the earth with her claws, she bent slightly closer to the ground, her underbelly fur skimming it like a hopping rock on a lake. With a final deep breath, Mapleshade darted forward like a pike, outstretching her claws about to strike. Yet, she suddenly turned into a clumsy badger, her lungs and muscles bursting with pain, making her tumble from the air. Landing heavily and awkwardly on her shoulder.

Glancing over, the healing wounds were ripped once again, oozing fresh blood. Mapleshade wanted to rip herself open at that point. What in the name of Starclan, was wrong with her?

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Patchpaw couldn't contain his excitement anymore, speeding around the side of the Barn and calling out to his beloved sister, "Petalkit! It's me and Appledusk! We're here.", he yelled. His shouts echoed until there was only stillness and silence left. No cream head popped out from behind the corner. No reply back. Nothing.

A horrid drain fell over the young cat.

Worried, Patchpaw glanced back to his father for guidance as staggered up the slope, a deadly serious expression. Just like it had been for the entire journey up here. Ever since Reedshine had told the- Patchpaw quickly shook away the dark thoughts. Still vaguely hoping his mother hadn't brought any harm on the poor kit. "No

one responding to my calls.", Patchpaw reported quietly as Appledusk joined him at the top of the hill, nose sniffing suspiciously. Without another word needed, Appledusk struck his muzzle to the ground, gliding Patchpaw round the side of the large red building. It wasn't long before Patchpaw gave up trying to follow his father's example entirely, sitting at the sidelines as the cream tom zigged-zagged and paced up and down, trying to make sense of the cluster of scents. Patchpaw certainly couldn't.

Eventually, Appledusk stood beside a small pile of log, looking overly sternly at a dip in the earth. "Hello?!", he called down into it, "Myler? Petalkit?". Yet just like Patchpaw, he got no response. The ginger and white kit joined him, blinking down at it. "Maybe they're not here.", Patchpaw suggested. Though, Appledusk rapidly shook his board head, "No. Their scents are too fresh. They're definitely here.". So why weren't they replying? For a heartbeat, Patchpaw wondered if Bloomheart had visited them. Though quickly dismissed it, knowing his father would've detected blood by now.

Even if he'd only been 2 moon olds the last he was here, he still distinctly remembered the entrance that borrowed under the wall, allowing entry inside. Yet now, it was bordered up with long sleets of stripped bark, stabbed into the wall by silver rusting needles. Now covered up, completely impassable. Appledusk hissed under his breath. "What happened?", Patchpaw gasped, ears pricked.

Appledusk grumbled his reply, "The twolegs probably didn't have a gaping hole in their Barn.". He then turned to his son, "If I not mistaken, isn't there a second way in?". Hurriedly, Parchpaw tried shuffling through his limited memories, searching for the specific spot his father spoke of.

"I think so.", Patchpaw mewed back, unsure of his own words. Without even needing to say it, the two cats separated, one going left, the other going right, starting the tedious search. Carefully, Patchpaw scanned the reds walls, with bright white stripes running down it's sides like a tabby's markings.

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Recalling, while the Thunderclan patrol had tried breaking into the

Barn to avenge Ravenwing, Myler had come through some small slit in the roof, near one of the corners. Though they'd been inside the Barn as climbed up there, outside there was only a sheer drop. So how did Myler get into the Barn from the outside? His bright eyes aimlessly drifted around, as he absorbed the surroundings; a few indescribable twoleg objects either made from wood or shining stone lay scattered round, with no clear organization but something slightly familiar caught his eye. A massive stack of golden grass, leaning against the Barn wall, reaching up and up until it touched the tip of the roof. An idea sparking into his head.

Without hesitating, Patchpaw rushed up to golden hill's base, beginning the long ascent upwards. Grass shifted under his weight, threatening to cave under, sending him tumbling down. But he didn't care, nothing could stop the young kit. Petalkit was on the other sides of those walls! He just kept on bounding up it in long strides like trudging through thick mud. After a few more slips, he eventually made it to the peak of a golden mountain, the roof now in reach. It was a flat surface, made from thin silver stone, creating a wave pattern like gentle ripples on a calm lake. Just as he was rearing up, outstretching his paws to grab the ledge, a concerned voice came from far below, "Patchpaw! Are you thicker than a fish? Get down from there!", Appledusk shouted up, no more than a cream smudge in the vast view.

"This is the only way to get into the Barn, trust me!", Patchpaw assured the paranoid parent, gripping the edges of the roof and heaving himself up. He was forced to settle down on the cold ragged surface as he waited while the former Riverclan cat failed miserably to get up the large hay pile, flopping and flailing like a bird in the water. For once, Patchpaw was grateful for Thunderclan blood flowing through his veins, at least then he wasn't a fish in a cat pelt. "Just remember-", Appledusk gasped as he made it to the top,"We are not squirrels.". Finally, he rolled onto the roof, wildly panting.

Usually, Patchpaw would have returned the witty remark, but with Shykit's life on the line, they didn't have time for messing around. Getting up, he clambered over the long rows of grey bumps, checking each corner in turn. Once again, Appledusk lugging

behind, completely out of his element. It wasn't until he made to the last one, he finally saw the small slit in the red walls as he peered over the edge, a sheer drop just below him. Next to him, his father lashed his tail. "I've said it and I'll say it again, we are not squirrels.", he turned to Patchpaw sternly.

The back of Patchpaw's neck rippled in annoyance, "I'd thought you of all cat would be taking this seriously, why are you making jokes?".

"That wasn't a joke, Patchpaw. We're the only cats who can get Shykit back, so we can't be getting ourselves killed beforehand with unnecessarily climbing.", Appledusk pointed out.

Though Patchpaw wasn't having it, ignoring his father's warning, sliding on his belly toward the edge. A creamy tail swept against his chest, trying to create a wall between him and possible death, but he just knocked it away. He quickly glanced over to Appledusk, "You said yourself- Petalkit may be the only one to know where Mum is. You can be a coward and back off, but I'm not going to.". Appledusk puffed up his chest in silence defiance, grumbling.

With that, Patchpaw unsheltered his claws, digging them deep into the silvery roof, and steadily lowered himself from the roof. First, swinging one leg off the side, and with a slight hesitation, the next. His front paws suddenly strained painfully, needing to hold his entire body weight. Panicked, he kept his eyes firmly planted on the vast blue sky above, not daring to look down.

It was daunting to think that Myler and Petalkit needed to do this every time they wanted to in and out of their own home. Yet that meant if they could do it, so could he. So slowing his breathing, Patchpaw swung his body, gaining speed. Until enough was built up, he ungripped the safety off the ledge. For a heartbeat, he held on nothingness, wind sweeping through his fur, all he could do was focus on the entrance. Rapidly speeding towards it, Patchpaw outstretched his paws, barely grabbing onto the narrow outcrop of wood, ripping the breath from his body as he slammed into the wall.

With a groan of pain and heart-pounding, Patchpaw hurriedly

scrambled through the slit, rolling onto a wooden beam, laying there for a moment. But it was short-lived. As Appledusk followed suit, tumbling past in a cream blur, before latching onto the slim ledge in the rather ungraceful matter. Patchpaw comes off his side, as Appledusk entered inside.

A thick ray of orange sunlight filtered through the cracks of the Barn, giving everything a sickly glowing hue. The light was so fierce, it stung Patchpaw's eyes. The air was stuffy and humid, a lot worse then Patchpaw remember since he was here last. The large area was stuffed with mountains upon mountains of hay, making Patchpaw wander what the twolegs could possibly use it all for. Somewhere amongst this sea of gold, lay his sister. The two cats shared a nervous glance, before Patchpaw lead the way across the crisscrossing wooden beams, like giant thick branches. Pressing against the wall, Patchpaw slivered like a snake through the maze of beams, crawling up and under. Until eventually, finding a haystack tall enough to skim the edges of bark blocks.

Going down them seemed a lot easier than trying to trudge up the straw, or it should have been. The challenge was trying to lose his balance and tumble, which he failed at. The yellow grass giving under the pressure, the world spinning as he rapidly twilled in the air with large clumps of hay, like a rockslide, reaching the stone floor with a moan.

Still, dizzy, Patchpaw shook the grass blades from his ginger pelt, just as Appledusk meet with him at the bottom. In the far gloomy corner, lay a mix of cream, black and white fur as two cats slept piled on top of each other. Myler was protectively and tightly wrapped around Petalkit, as if he was using his own body as a shield. A wave of emotions spread through the kit in that heartbeat, it was so strange seeing his sister after so long. After a brief pause, the father and son shared a nod and Appledusk let off a sharp yap, "Myler.", his voice echoing in the dense and stuffy space.

Instantly, Myler jerked violently away from Petalkit, now standing, his fur ridged with shock. Petalkit was disturbed from her slumber too, snapping her head back as she erupted from sleep.

For a while, no one bared move as Myler and Petalkit tried to

process the two cats in front of them. Finally, Myler let out a massive sigh, rudding his paw over his face, "Please, don't do that.", he muttered, still half-bewildered.

Appledusk dipped his head, "My apologies, Myler. But this is urgent.".

Leaving the two toms to deal with the boring stuff, Patchpaw went for something much more important. Joy surged through him as he rushed towards Petalkit, still curled up in the corner. Long pink scars snaking down her back and neck like worms, where Bloomheart had left his permanent mark. The memory still haunting Patchpaw to this day. "Hey Petalki-", Patchpaw began but stopped when Petalkit suddenly flinched away from him, burying her head in her paws. "Wh-what's wrong?", he mumbled, "Petalkit. It's me, your bro.", nudging her with his muzzle, trying to get her up. From within her cream fur, came out Petalkit's muffled mew, "It's just Petal now. Not Petalkit.", she grumbled, sounding irritated.

Patchpaw let off a pleased purr, "That makes two of us!", he exclaimed, "Dad gave me my apprentice name, so from now on, you can call me, Patchpaw. After that, it'll be Patchshade.".

Hearing that, Petal lifted her head. It was strange, her green eyes were murky like muddy water, dirty with confusion and bitterness. What happened? She narrowed her eyelids, "You shouldn't be naming yourself after cats like her, Patchpaw.". His mood soured, but he couldn't help but be honest with himself. After everything she'd done- maybe Petal was right.

He was about to reply, but something rendered him wordless. A large crushed up dock leaf, reduced to green pulp, was smeared over her left eye like a fungus. He felt his jaw drop, bluffed what it could possibly be for. Petal seemed to read his mind, answering his unspoken question, "My eye got damaged.", she muttered. Then, their attention drifted behind them as Appledusk's and Myler's conversation loudened. The Riverclan cat growled to the air, "-I need you to think, Myler. Did Mapleshade have Shykit with her? A kit's life is on the line here!.", he yelled, getting himself overworked. Myler back down, shaking his head again, "Neither of us scented or saw any kit.", he confirmed.

As Patchpaw glanced back to Petal, her expression had darkened over, becoming grim and serious. Making Patchpaw's tail twitched with uneasiness. "Good to know Mapleshade hasn't changed a bit.", she drily remarked as she finally rose to her paws, calmly padding up to Appledusk and Myler, Patchpaw silently following.

Appledusk lit up brighter than any firefly or star as his daughter approached, giving him a reluctant dip of the head. Grumbling as Appledusk licked her between the ears in greeting, "It's good to see you, Petalkit-". But he halted mid-sentence when he too, noticed the leaf covering her eye, "What is that?", he question, suspicious. Myler bowed slightly as if in apology, "I tried copying what you Clan cats do with herbs for Petal's scratched eye- but I'm not entirely sure how you do it."

Appledusk shuffled around uncontrollably at the hear of Petal's new loner name, but his face quickly twisted into a snarl, "Who did to you? Was it Bloomheart?".

Petal subtly flinched with the mention of the cat that scarred her for life, yet Shockley, it wasn't the cat she named, "It was Mapleshade.", she admitted with a sigh.

It felt like a rockfall of boulders had landed onto Patchpaw's frail shoulders in that moment. "What?!", Patchpaw blurted. Though that nothing compared to their father's reaction, the muscle straining round his skeleton-like coiling snakes. Tail puffed, baring his teeth and fur spiked. Seething. Abruptly, Appledusk twisted round, stalking towards large haystack again, seemly about to exit to the Barn again. "Dad.", Patchpaw uttered, "What are we going to do?". Urgently, wanting to know what his father planned to do with his mother.

Appledusk halted, glancing over his shoulder with a fiery glare, "What else?", he questioned coldly, "I'm going to kill that foxheart." Panic surged through the young tom, instantly springing over Appledusk, biting down into tail, trying to drag him back. "No, you can't!", Patchpaw begged in a muffled voice, "She's your mate!".

Now He turned fully towards Patchpaw, his dragging tail pounding down hard on the floor, "She stopped being my mate a long time

ago.". From the sidelines, Myler took a step back, gulping while Petal just rolled her eyes.

Refusing to accept it, Patchpaw let go of the cream cat's tail and shook his head, "Even if she's not your mate anymore, she's still my Mum.", he huffed, "If you kill her- th-then you're just as bad as she is!". Patchpaw expected this hit him right at the sweet spot, to make him think twice. Yet, Appledusk just casually shook his head, seemly disappointed, "Patchpaw, you don't understand what you're saying. She's a cold-blooded murderer.".

He began to get unhinged, failing to get his point across, now going for low blows, "You're a murderer too! Birchface and Flowerpaw anyone?".

Luckily, this one really seemed to hit Appledusk's at his core, as he broke out into shouting, going into a full out rant, "That was an accident during a battle, that's nothing like that she-cat done. Patchpaw, you've seen it with your own eyes. Ravenwing, he saved your life and how does your mother repay him? With claws in his throa-". Out of nowhere, Petal stepped forward, intruding onto Patchpaw's and Appledusk's heated argument without a care in the world, raising her tail for silence.

Looking at the two cats in turn, she growled at them, "While you two keep on wasting time, my little sister could literally be getting her throat ripped open right now. Our only goal should be getting Shykit home safely, it doesn't matter what happens to Mapleshade. So stop arguing. We need to go now.". With nothing more to say, Petal strolled past Appledusk towards the largest haystack, seemly wanting to come with them. "What are you doing?", Appledusk questioned.

"I'm coming with you.", she mewed simply.

Not even Myler saw Petal's abrupt decision coming, a wave of gasps rippling through the small group of cats. Hurrying towards her, Patchpaw blocked her path, "You can't.", he insisted, "Not with your eye.". Snorting, Petal used her shoulder to brag past, raw determination during off of her. "You can't stop me, Patchpaw. I'm coming and that's final.". Patchpaw opens his jaw to protest but

strangely, the overprotective Appledusk seemed to agree, "Let her, Patchpaw. This family business, whatever happens, she should be there to see it.". A sudden drain for the future come over him, wishing he could freeze time forever so he'd never be forced to face a painful reality. They're now a pining for his brother, now amongst Shadowclan's ranks. He should be here.

From behind them, Myler took a step forward, raising his head and tail high. Though his whiskers twitched, clearly trying to hide his nerves, "If you're going anywhere near your mother again, I need to be there to protect you.". After a brief thoughtful pause, Petal shrugged whiling sighing, "Fine.". Making Patchpaw wonder just how badly Mapleshade had injured her leafy green eye, after all, it'd also been Mapleshade who'd slashed Bloomheart's eye, remembering it being covered in a gloomy grey fog of blindness. Would Petal's eye heal blind? He tightened up, a frosty shiver running down his short tail. Hopefully not.

Grateful, Appledusk dipped his head politely the black and white loner before turning away, "It's settled then.", he muttered in a frosty voice, "Let's move, if we're lucky, maybe I can still pick up her scent.".

Chapter 20

Every instinct, every scrap of logic, every hair on her body, had been constantly yowling at her, to keep away. To just stay away, that's all she needed to do and it was sealed deal. That piece of filth would be out of her life forever. Yet, she just couldn't. Every whiff of his rotten scent or a glimpse from distance gave Mapleshade a dreadful, painful reminder Bloomheart was still out there. Still breathing, still alive. And Mapleshade couldn't allow that. Every step he was allowed to take, was another injustice. He had to die, he deserved to die. Which would be happening tonight.

She'd absorbed his every movement since he'd left her with her father's killer. Seemly starting to set up a routine, his scent trail would linger up here every other day, mingled with another Thunderclan scent. Obviously, that of his son, the newly named, Nettlebreeze. Even exile couldn't keep the father and son apart. Using this rocky wasteland as their secret meeting place.

The limp Shykit dangled from her jaws like a dead rat, barely breathing as the ferns brushed against them while they moved silently past them. Without milk or rest, the kit had completely collapsed. What made it worse, every few heartbeats or so, Mapleshade thought she could make out the slight noise of a weak cough. White or greencough. Curse the Leafbare weather. If Reedshine had just given birth to the maggot earlier, she wouldn't be having those unnecessary problems. Not that it mattered too much. All she needed to do was the same thing as Patchpaw, ambush another Medicine cat at highstones and force them to treat the useless lump. Maybe she could give the Riverclan Medicine cat, Echopaw- if that was still her name, a visit. A sick warmth tingling through her matted fur, at thought of getting revenge on that little snitch. Just like her friend, Ravenwing.

A purr of satisfaction tumbled in her raw throat as the echo of a raging river meets the hollow carven of her ears. The Gorge River. Vicious waves slapping against the rocky cliffs with a furious hiss

and an explosion of foam. Climbing up a cluster of steep boulders, only a few scrawny weeds and scrubs could grow amongst the cracks of the barren sloping cliff slide. Hardly a sign of life. Just falling short of Thunderclan's lush forest of oaks, teeming with plump prey.

Usually, no Thunderclan cat would have any reason to journey to this isolated corner of the borders. But the cats' scents that lingered around here like ghosts of the past, had very good reason to come here. After the wearing climb to the top, through the field of jagged stone teeth, Mapleshade made out a distant tree line, the beginning of Thunderclan territory. Despite it being unlucky for any patrolling warriors to spot her from this distance, Mapleshade descended down the hillside again, in search of a place to hide.

With the bursting torrent far below her, Mapleshade perched herself on a nearby ledge, narrowly avoiding the cliff's peak. Roughly dropping Shykit onto the bare rock, Mapleshade tucked her paws in for the possibly long wait. Forcing herself to constantly keep her senses as sharp as claws, struggling not to let her mind wander with the drifting clouds soaring high above. Though surprisingly, she wasn't forced to wait long, her prey already arriving.

She strained her neck, when she noticed the silhouette of bright orange tom, almost glowing gold, his figures washed out by the blinding sun. Standing tall, Nettlebreeze, barely a warrior, gazed at the rampaging waters from a protruding ridge. A gale echoing in the narrow valley, blasted Thunderclan scent into her face. Pressing herself against the stone to remain concealed, Mapleshade quietly grasped Shykit by the scruff, sliding up the sloop on her belly, like a slivering snake, never keeping her eyes off the ginger tom for a moment. One advantage of Shykit's sickness, meant the kit would shut up for once, ensuring she couldn't give Mapleshade's position away.

Gradually, she crawled onto the moss-covered peak, now able to the Thunderclan cat clear as snow in a green forest. Nettlebreeze, sitting peacefully with a fluffy tail settle around his paws, blissfully enjoying the wind as it ruffled his thick fur. Holding her breath, Mapleshade slipped behind a pile of pebbles, peering around it's crusty corners, Nettlebreeze still remained idle like a frozen tree.

Mousebrain. Carefully, she swerved past the pebbles, spreading out her toes on each paw, making each paw step was as silent as motionless eerily night. Now just a few fox-lengths away. Lowering her head, Shykit's dangling legs began scraping against the hard ground. So laying Shykit down, shoving her behind her with her back leg, Mapleshade rose from her crouch, withdrawing her claws and teeth.

"Turn and face me!", Mapleshade challenged, corning Nettlebreeze on his narrow platform.

Instantly, the young tom twisted round to face his opponent, ears sticking up in shock. "Y-you shouldn't be here.", he stuttered, unable to find the proper words. His attention swiftly swerved to the insect wriggling on the bare stone behind Mapleshade, letting off soft yet weak mews. "Who that kitten?", Nettlebreeze questioned hurriedly, narrowing his eyelids to slits.

Mapleshade only chuffed with amusement, "She's mine.". Though it was clear as daylight that the Thunderclan warrior was unconvinced yet utter nothing, instead of lowering his head and tail, watching suspiciously. His lean muscles twitching uneasily.

Time dragged on and somehow, still, Mapleshade stood there, free of blood or injury. "What's wrong with you?", she accused, disgusted, "I murdered your mother! You should be killing me right now!". She just couldn't understand, it would be like Larchpaw not going to avenge if she'd ever be slain by the claws of the enemy.

Mapleshade took a step closer, spitting, forcing Nettlebreeze a step back, closer to the edge and a watery grave. Briefly, Nettlebreeze's deep blue eyes glared with anger like boiling water and tail swang like a low hanging branch, but was quickly replaced with infuriating signs of pity. Then he slowly shook his head, "I'm not fighting a sick cat.", he meowed calmly. "I'm not sick!", she growled. His expression then shifted to something unreadable. Then he went for a blow that hit Mapleshade right at the core, "You know after my Mum was killed, Tulipfur actually come up to me and apologized. She says wasn't angry at you, Mapleshade. Only disappointed in herself, that she couldn't save her own daughter.".

Mapleshade snapped like she was the one cornered, pelt spiking up like a field of pine needles. Fury pulsing through her veins. She backed up, straining her muscles, about to lunge forward. Though Nettlebreeze quickly reacted, spreading his paws evenly apart, into a defensive position, preparing himself for her imminent attack. At least he wasn't incompetent. Yet, she wasn't even able to lift off the ground, before the racketing of nimble paws against a stone, filled her senses. Then there a flash of brown as Bloomheart crashed into her. For a heartbeat, she'd thought she'd turn deaf as Bloomheart screeched like a bat directly into her ears, "We had a deal!".

The world span as they rolled, but Bloomheart managed to plant his foot on her stomach, finally gaining control and forcing her to the ground. "I couldn't care less about your pathetic deal!", Mapleshade spat up at him hatefully as he clawed at her face. Strangely, Bloomheart deceased with the contrast scratching, just staring at her blankly. He rose his head, hissing bitterly, "I don't understand- after everything I've done for you-"

"Done for me?!", Mapleshade interrupted, meeting his pale gaze, "Trying to killing my kits? Oh, that's is rich, Bloomheart. Just rich.". From afar, Nettlebreeze nervously circled the two struggling cats, his whiskers twitching.

Without Bloomheart responding, Mapleshade gave a wicked grin, exposing razor teeth, ready of ripping his flesh, "It's like we agreed, Bloomheart.", she taunted, "I went after your kit, so you can go after mine.". Arching her ears, she used them to point out the tiny bundle of Shykit, tightened up into a ball. That whining lump would die soon anyway of starvation or sickness, whichever came first. No Queen could grow attached to a kit who was gone so quickly. At least Reedshine had extra kits she could start over with.

Instead of instantly going for Shykit as she expected, Bloomheart just stretched out without releasing Mapleshade, sending the kit rolling down the rocks with a single kick, as if she was crowfood. "As I care about that hairball!", he dryly retorted, returning his attention to Mapleshade. "Hey!", Nettlebreeze exclaimed somewhere out of her line of vision. Then he came into a frame as he sped after the rumbling kit, hasty catching her between his forepaws, letting her flop against his fur, breathless.

She let off horrid gurgling noises as Bloomheart pressed his paw hard into her windpipe, choking her. "I'm not going through loops to get revenge on you, Mapleshade. I should've realised it sooner. You can't torture a cat who doesn't care anymore. The only thing that matters now, is killing you directly. You can't hurt anyone else as a lifeless corpse."

Mapleshade stared up at him, baring her long fangs. Bloomheart's words didn't stink in and she intended it to keep it that way. There was no way she was going to sympathise with her traitorous mentor. She refused to! Letting off a sigh, Bloomheart's expression was as bleak as a vast empty landscape rotting during leafbare, "To think I once your proud mentor. You really are a lost cause.", he mumbled, "Nettlebreeze- Let's finish her!".

Behind him, Nettlebreeze stayed firmly rooted to the floor like one of the stubborn weeds the grew there, shaking his head, "But you promised you wouldn't kill anymore.".

Seeing that they were on the verge of an argument, Mapleshade attempted to use it as an opportunity to escape, twisting round under Bloomheart's weight, reaching out to his leg with her fangs. However, Bloomheart didn't even need to glance at her to sense it, gripping her head and slamming it into the floor, casually continuing the conversation with Nettlebreeze. She snorted under the pain. She was stronger than this!

"But this is too good- Please, son.", Bloomheart begged from above her, "This is the only way to end this. Once she's dead, this nightmare can finally be over.". In defiance, Nettlebreeze wrapped his fluffy ginger tail over the kit, tightening his grip and shuffling back. Giving his father the cold shoulder. "Fine, do what you want.", he huffed, "But I won't be a part of it. At least one of us should try to remain an honourable warrior".

The pain seemed to strike Bloomheart emotionally, his eyes flashing, "Forget honour. Forget the code. Those things are worthless now.", he explained, "Nettlebreeze- We both know I won't be joining you or your mother in Starclan. Those are our last few seasons together. So let Dawnfeather rest in peace, knowing her son has avenged her. And if not her- do it for me.".

Yet, Nettlebreeze wouldn't even acknowledge his existence.

"Be that way.", Bloomheart scoffed, an edge in his voice, "If you want to disappointment to me and your mother, that's your choice.".

With that, Bloomheart raised his paw high into the air, about to bring it down. Mapleshade felt like everything was caving in, her mind, her memories, her goals, at the face of death! She couldn't die here, not to his wretched claws! Suddenly, she began wildly kicking out at his belly and striking her front paws against his chest. Somehow, he didn't show a hint of pain, still bringing his claws down for the killing blow at an alarming rate, aiming for her exposed throat. It all a blur. Starclan help me!

Out of nowhere, there comes an enraged yowl from the distance, echoing amongst the deep valley and towering cliffs. Both Nettlebreeze's and Bloomheart's pelts ruffed like hedgehogs quills, as a small group of cats rushed towards, Mapleshade unable to tell who from her angel while pinned down. Steadily, Nettlebreeze retreated towards Bloomheart, dragging Shykit with him, their flanks brushes as they firmly stood side by side like a barrier. Just as newcomers clambered up the sloop into view, Mapleshade gasped in utter horror. With: Patchpaw, Appledusk, Petal and Myler ran up in a long stream of pelts.

Grief struck her as Patchpaw's pain-stricken gaze meet hers. Desperately, Mapleshade wanted to cry out to them, but the ground kept on being driven against her jaw, Bloomheart sealing it shut. The four cats pressed tightly together as they lined up in a flat rank, trapping their opponents onto the ledge. The kits protected in the centre. Either trembling, utterly terrified or burning with pure hatred. Everything was still and quiet, only the faint tumbling of growls breaking their silence, yet unable to form proper words. How could they? Faced with those cats that either ruined their lives or tried to kill them. "You!", Petal exclaimed towards Bloomheart, spitting, finally shaking the unmoving atmosphere.

Bloomheart stared at his victim, the kit he'd stared for life physically and mentally, and after awhile blinked several times with curiosity, "You're eye.", he absorbed the crusty green leaf over her

face. Turning to look down at Mapleshade, his whiskers then twitched with amusement, "You did that to her, didn't you? You're own daughter.". Next, giving Petal a mocking purr, "So how does it feel, Petalkit? To have your eye ripped out by Mapleshade's claw? Certainly isn't pleasant, it is?.".

Hearing that, Appledusk let off an angered battle cry, lunging towards Bloomheart. However, Patchpaw and Myler rushed forward, using their own bodies to form a wall, blocking him. "Dad- don't.", Patchpaw warned. Appledusk swallowed back his anger. This was not a situation to be careless with, with his kit under the claws of the enemy, he had to tread carefully with every word and every action. A single hair out of place could mean the difference between life and death for his daughter and for Mapleshade. Clearly, struggling to hold back his fear, Myler stood squarely to the two toms, "Enough. The kit, that's all we seek. Hand her to us and we'll be on our way.".

Though from above her, Mapleshade heard Bloomheart sneer, "And who are you, kittypet?", glancing at Myler's thick dull brown collar, like strangling vine, "Clan business is far beyond you.". Appledusk bragged past ginger kit and the black loner, approaching the pair of Thunderclan cats. Nettlebreeze's fur bristled, but Appledusk ignored him, including Mapleshade, going nose to nose with the siamese cat instead, Bloomheart taller but Appledusk buckler. "Give me the kit.", he ordered with a harsh tone, his patience being pushed to its limits.

The father and son shared a glance, Nettlebreeze tightening his grip on Shykit, resting against his paws. "And Why should I?", Nettlebreeze questioned, "What makes you any better then Mapleshade?". I'm nothing like that fish-face! She thought bitterly, still unable to speak. As far as Nettlebreeze was concerned, blinded by the bias of Thunderclan, Appledusk was nothing but the murderer of Birchface and Flowerpaw.

"Because that kit-", Appledusk mewed quietly, "Is mine and Reedshine's daughter. The daughter that Mapleshade kidnapped from the Riverclan camp after she lured foxes to it. We're here to return her home.".

Nettlebreeze searched for his father's wisdom, "Should we?", he asked, tail gently swaying. After a pause, Bloomheart shrugged, "She's no use to us. Let them.". With that, Nettlebreeze nodded, grasping Shykit by the scruff, meeting Appledusk mid-way, dropping her onto the floor before ducking away while the cream cat leaned forward, taking her. Shykit flinched in her father's grip, unsure what was happening. Her heartbeat quicked so much, it pounded as if a deer's hoof was kicking at her ribs. No! Beginning to wildly thrash like stubborn prey, trying to get free. Yet, Bloomheart simply needed to dig his claws into Mapleshade unhealing gushes, causing a surge of agony. Again, Mapleshade's head was flat against the stone, mute. Let me talk! She screamed out in her head.

For the longest time, no one bared move, confusion on what to do next. Here stood Mapleshade, their abusive mother and Bloomheart, their attempted murderer. Were they really just going to let them go? Apparently, Appledusk and Myler seemed to think so, as they reluctantly gathered up the littermates with a sweep of their tails, trying to slowly guild them away, clear force in their movements. Don't leave me with those foxhearts! Patchpaw hesitantly followed, his eyes not leaving his pinned mother, yet unlike her brother, Petal refused to move.

"So we're just meant to leave them?", she exclaimed in disbelief. Hurriedly, Appledusk stepped in front of her, trying to nudge her away with his shoulder, before she could provoke Bloomheart to attack. Trying to explain to his rebellious kit, "Shykit's safety is more important. We're got her now, we can't risk any more conflict.".

Though Petal still wouldn't accept it, lashing her pale tail, " If we let Mapleshade go, there's nothing stopping her from just doing again.", she pointed out, hissing, "As long as she's out there, none of your kits will be safe.". It felt as if a wave of frost was spreading across her insides, hearing Petal's chilling words. What did she plan to do exactly? Her own daughter wouldn't actually-

Bloomheart's vile words broke into Mapleshade's storm of dark thought, remarking slyly like a fox, "I can personally ensure you, Petalkit, You're Mother won't be bothering you, because she'll be dead.". Instantly Mapleshade reacted, straining her muscles, feeling

them tear under her pelt, gathering every remain of strength she still had. In the past, she could always rely on her inner survival instincts, to push her body beyond natural levels, until it was on the verge of breaking. But this time- this time it wasn't enough. She couldn't break free. The dreaded thoughts drained away into a pit, to replace it with an emptiness, a strange numbness. She just kept lying there.

Disgusted, they would speak about whether to kill her or not, so leniently while she was right there, listening to every word, as if she was nothing but an ant. Though, Petal gave her no notice, her focus solely on Bloomheart. Don't let him do this to me! Mapleshade begged helplessly to Petal, trying to stare at her.

Luckily, Patchpaw instantly rushed to his mother's aid, his ears arched back, "You're not killing my Mum!". From her littermate's side, Petal added onto Patchpaw's comment, edged with a hiss, "And I can say the exact same about you, Bloomheart. You can't be left just to roam free either.", she retorted, nerves gripped her, making her legs as frail as leaves as she faced her worst nightmare.

Briefly, Bloomheart seemed to be taken back by the kits' spirits, but it was quickly replaced with an amused chuckle, "Trust me, I have no interest in killing you anymore. It's only Mapleshade, I want. In fact, Why don't we just do it now?". No! Mapleshade silently screamed out, trying to wriggle away, get no matter what she did, she couldn't escape Bloomheart's grip. Nor, could call out for help, as her mouth failed to edge open against the floor. Even if she could, Mapleshade wasn't sure her family would notice her pathetic pleads for mercy.

Next to him, Nettlebreeze spat in his face from revolution, "Don't make them watch!". Calmly, Bloomheart flinched away from him and addressed his concerns, "Why wouldn't they want to watch? Mapleshade ruined their lives more than anyone!".

"You sick rouge!", Nettlebreeze snarled with hatred as his Bloomheart wasn't even his father.

Out of nowhere, the warrior's head snapped forward like a broken branch, latching his jaw around the grey tom. Despite being taller

and heavier, in a great display of strength, Nettlebreeze hauled Bloomheart away. His overwhelming weight was rippled from Mapleshade, the piercing pressure lifted, now able to breathe, gasping to fill her lungs.

Bloomheart skidded across the ground, barely able to get control in time as his claws scraped against the smooth wet stone, narrowing missing the edge, which leads to the watery depths.

Now free, all instincts took over, her lust for revenge suddenly rediscovered. Turning on Appledusk who held Shykit, who stared at her in shock. "Shykit belongs to me!", she yowled, pouncing like a Leopardclan warrior. In mid-air, Mapleshade felt sharp fangs dig deep into her scruff, as Nettlebreeze threw her towards the stumbling Bloomheart. Wind struck her face as she flew, dangerously close towards the gorge river. They landed painfully in a tough heap, unable to untangle themselves from flailing legs and lashing tails. "Mama!", Shykit's cries hit Mapleshade's ears. Trying to get away, Bloomheart held her down in response, taken over by blood thirst, wild like a savage beast.

"Get off of me!", she snarled at Bloomheart as she tried twisting out of his grip, slashing his muzzle. Planting her paws onto the ground, just as she was about to break away, she instantly froze. The loud gushing of water, now suddenly apparent.

Petal and Nettlebreeze stood directly in front of them, but their expressions were- different. Something darkened in their young eyes like a corrupting haze. Without needing to utter anything, they shared a glance, neutral understanding washing over them.

With a single nod, Mapleshade's entire world comes crashing down. They wouldn't-

Abruptly, with the speed of a deer, they charged forward, in less than the blink of the eye. Bloomheart and Mapleshade were powerless to do anything, as they were rammed into, knocked off the side of the cliff. How could her own daughter kill her?!

Air swirled around, Mapleshade left weightless, almost felt as if she had wings, yet of course, Starclan would grant her no such luxury.

Finding herself drifting away from Bloomheart, as he screamed, mixed terror and anger, filling her skull. The last sound she ever hears. Wildly she twisted and span as she fell an increasing speed, trying to guild herself to the rock face- Maybe to grab onto it and save herself. But it was hopeless.

Before Mapleshade knew it, she slammed onto river's surface, with a massive crush with an explosion of foam.

The depths rapidly swallowed her under. Weighed down by the river sulking into her bones, like carrying boulders.

Flailing, twisting, turning, spinning.

Swift currents instantly grabbed her, trashing her from side to side, pain in every point in her body. No idea which direction it was taking her.

From the corners of her blurry vision, she catches a flicker of wild movements from above. Bloomheart fighting for his life against the watery demon.

Rapidly they were separated, as he was sucked down into the shadowy river floor, terrified.

Gasping, straining, tightening, choking.

Forcing her blazing amber eyes open, all directions were just gloomy murk, an empty blue void.

Unexpectedly, Bloomheart emerged from the darkness, thrown upwards, crushing into her. Using everything in her not to open her mouth to cry out in pain.

As soon as he arrived, Bloomheart was gone, out of sight.

A sudden spark of hope, when the flaring sun broke through the surface, high above, sending dim beams down, breaking up the blackness.

Closing her eyes again as the salty sting overwhelmed her, she kicked out against nothing, like a flailing fish, reaching out.

Overwhelming, hopeless, defenceless, nothingness.

But the cruel river didn't care, instead of edging up, she dragged down by an arm formed of shadows, a storm of bubbles like fireflies, dancing around her, mocking her.

Then, in her final moments, Mapleshade got one final betray, herself. With her lunges on the verge of bursting, aching with unbearable torture.

Defenceless to do anything as her mouth slipped open, in an effect to breath one final time. But there was no air to breathe.

Instantly, dirty water forced it's way down her throat, feeling it borrow down into her lunges and stomach.

Draining, Dimming, Dying.

Adding to her weight, heavier and heavier, sickening, further and further.

Until, all she felt inside her was water, consuming her insides. Now drifting aimlessly, as a purple fog edged over her vision.

Strange numbness coming over her.

Not fear, not sadness, only emptiness.

She was hollow now, all her organs now flushed out.

Letting the George river claim, letting herself sink like a pebble, into the vast deep.

And the unknown.

Chapter 21

"No-no-no!", was the only thing that Petal could hear her, her poor bother repeating that one single word, trying to deny the horror that had just unfolded in front of his naive eyes.

Crouching at the edge of death, gridding his claws so hard into the stone, reducing them to boney stumps. All Petal could do herself was stare blankly into the crashing waves. It was hard to believe that her once-beloved mother, were under them, buried far beneath the surface, which hopefully, one day, to become a distant bad memory.

Reality still not fully settling in yet. She could repeat all she wanted: She killed her mother, she killed her mother- Despite that, the words still hung meanless in her head for now. Not considering herself as a murderer quite yet. Undoubtedly, it would set in eventually. Dreading the overwhelming emotions to come.

Her heart pined for Larchpaw, all the way in Shadowclan. He should of been here to witness this.

From behind, she could hear her little sister crackling whales, "Mama!". Petal flinching slightly as she heard the innocent kit call that thing, 'Mama'. The lies she must of feed her. Appledusk, who carried Shykit, was crouched to the stone, violently shaking, eyes unfocused and clouded. While Myler just stood far back, head bowing, wordless.

The young cat, Nettlebreeze stood beside her, his pelt boiling hot and sticky with shame, tail lashing. Gently, Petal placed her paw on it, to keep it still. He blinked at her, clouded over with confusion, "You did what you needed to.", she muttered, "You shouldn't be ashamed of that.". Horror crept over his face as he stared down at the cream coloured loner, towering over her, "Petal- Mapleshade was your mother. How are you so calm?".

Honestly, she didn't know. Though, she just shrugged, her mind

frosty and bitter, "Whoever that she-cat was, she was no mother of mine.", with mewed with a huff.

Nettlebreeze paused, before speaking again, his voice now quieter than raindrops pattering onto a leaf, "I have to apologize, how my father and the whole of Thunderclan have treated you and your littermates. You don't deserve any of i-". Though, Petal just flicked her tail into the air, signalling he didn't need to say anymore, "Save your breath, you shouldn't be responsible for apologizing for others' crimes.", Petal mewed, "What's done is done. Nothing can change that. And honestly after I've seen what the Clans capable of, I'm glad I was exiled."

Nettlebreeze nodded, returning his gaze to waters, where his father's body drifted somewhere. A horrid realisation came over Petal. Wasn't Nettlebreeze alone now? His littermate, Flowerpaw had drowned moons ago, after Appledusk accidentally pushed Birchfall into the river. Then both his parents had died recently, to Mapleshade's and his own bloodied paws.

"Nettlebreeze- How are you going to cope with this? You're alone now.", Petal muttered.

"I won't. That's the answer, Petal.", the young warrior mewed emotionlessly, "So many cats have died - If I dare to think about it too much, I'll snap. So I'm only going to focus on the present and hope to never look back."

In the background, Appledusk was frantically pacing around, getting Shykit to safety, while comforting a whaling Patchkit. He looked utterly panicked, hardly knowing what he was doing. After Shykit had been given to Myler, Appledusk froze when he locked eyes with Nettlebreeze - The brother of Flowerpaw, his accidental victim.

With an unbearable silence, Appledusk finally uttered, "Do you want me to explain what happened with Flowerpaw?".

Nettlebreeze turned his back on him, "No - I already know. I wasn't ready to commit to hating you, unlike Oakstar and Bloomheart. So I asked around the Gatherings and know your reputation - You're

always the first to flee from battle. You hate it. So killing a cat in cold blood is the last thing on your mind."

Nettlebreeze crouched tightly on stone, his voice brained, "And anyway, I've dealt with so many murderers, I can't bring myself to care about their motives. Just leave me alone, Appledusk. Get on with whatever you need to."

Petal respected Nettlebreeze's choose, but couldn't help but sigh out of pity. Then she noticed scraping noises as Patchpaw kneading on the spot, ready to leap over the ledge. Reacting quickly, her head shot forward, taking him by the neck and yanking him off his paws. Trapping him between her forepaws, Petal went to nose with her delusional bother, "I won't let you do that, Patchpaw.". Surprisingly, he didn't attempt to resist or struggle, simply laying there, violently shaking his head.

"No.", he protested, "I need to go after her. I can still save her.".

Petal sidestepped, laying next him instead of subduing him, wrapping her sleek tail over him, "You'll only get yourself killed as well, Patchpaw. She'll be long gone by now.".

"H-how could you?", Patchpaw begged, burying his head in paws and voice cracking with sorrow, "Our mother.".

Luckily, Appledusk stepped forward to give Petal a little backup, "Your mother died a long time ago, Patchpaw. Whatever she is now, it's not the same cat you and I loved. My Mapleshade wouldn't be capable of the crimes that rouge committed.". Noticeably, despite his words, Appledusk voiced was still distant and cold, like he wasn't all there. Still deeply saddened by their lose. Though, as the grown-up of the family, for his kits' sake, he would have to whale in grief last.

In the background, Myler nestled the panicking kit between his paws, trying his best to calm her. Hesitating leaving Patchpaw with Appledusk for the heartbeat, she crept over to her little sister. "Hush, young one. You're safe now.", Myler ensured. Still sniffing, Shykit blinked at the black and white cat, "Are you a Queen?". To that, Myler shook his head rapidly, "N-no.". Then he turned as he

caught Petal's amused purrs. He flattened his ears, "You heard that, didn't you?".

"Every word.", she confirmed.

Myler let off a sadden smile, with something clearly on his mind, which Petal could easily guess. "I understand if you want to rejoin your brother and father. It's only fair after something- like that happened.". The terror-filled faces of Bloomheart and Mapleshade, just as they realized their own kits' willingness to kill them flashing in her vision. It shook Petal to the core. Sighing, she shook her head, "After saving Shykit, there's no doubt, Appledusk will be using as an excuse to return to Riverclan. But if they're going to treat me differently solely on heritage, then they're not worth my time.".

Myler nodded, giving off a purr, "Know, you're always welcome in my Barn, Petal.".

Returning the purr, Petal leaned forward, Myler shuffling round to let her to get to Shykit, carefully grasping her scruff. A kit carrying a kit, was like swan trying to carry a goose. For Petal, she was heavier than a boulder. Not the most graceful or appealing of sights. Shykit shrivelling up into a ball, fear scent draining off of her. "Where are you taking me?", Shykit whispered weakly, too ill to even fidget. Certainly seemed smart for her age. Petal secretly hoping she got it from her big sister.

"I'm taking you, home.", Petal mewed with a muffled voice, "Back to your littermates and mother.".

"But Mapleshade said Reedshine wasn't my Mummy.", Shykit confirming Petal's worst fears. Petal couldn't respond, with her limit experience, nothing she could say could snap Shykit out the haze Mapleshade forced her in. Only the soft words of a Queen or Medicine cat could do that.

Admittedly, to Petal, Reedshine was no more than stranger. Sure, she'd seen her briefly while she defended them in Riverclan all those moons ago, but it was such a distant memory. And to think, this was the mother of her siblings, someone she barely knew. At least, Patchpaw had a few runs in with her. He did seem to like her,

and just maybe- she could replace the gaping hole Mapleshade had left.

With a grudge, Petal padded towards Appledusk, as he failed to comfort the emotional Patchpaw. Petal placed the dozing Shykit at her paws. Slowly turning, Appledusk meet her gaze, "What have you decided then?".

"I'm staying at the Barn with Myler. You're not going to convince me other wises.", she admitted, letting her built-up anger of the Clans cat flow out. Instantly, Patchpaw lunged to his paws, throwing himself at her. They went to the floor, as Patchpaw showered her with love, "I'll never forget you!", he exclaimed. "Neither will I.", she quietly responded. Petal pressed her muzzle into his forehead, unmoving for a long time. It so unreal. That she may never see him again.

Finally, the two littermates forced themselves to separate with deep regret. With a sigh, Appledusk nodded, "Well whatever you decide to do, just know, I'll always be proud of you.". That, right there, those very words, were what Petal had been waiting for the entirety of her short life. For Appledusk to finally slip and that she could expose, that all that he says, was just complete fox dung. Petal gave him a stare fiercer and colder than a blizzard, putting him on edge, including Patchpaw.

"Oh really?", she remarked slyly, "That's not what I heard back in Riverclan camp when we were exiled. You called us a mistake and you regret having us.", she pointed out. Appledusk seemed to be taken off guard by this, edging back as if Petal's harsh words were physically moving him. Then he had the nerve to start defending himself, "That wasn't aimed at you. I was talking about my own mistakes-".

"Oh, I don't need to hear that foxdung!", she snapped, "I heard every word. You uttered absolutely nothing in our defense, your own kits. You were only trying to protect yourself. And I'm not falling for a second, that Reedshine's pregnancy was a coincidence." Silence settled over the family, unsure how to respond to Petal's outburst.

Finally, Appledusk let out a shallow sigh of defeat, "You're right,

Petal. Before all this, I was only out for myself. My biggest mistake is ever thinking you were. But you're not at all, your litter is a gift from Starclan itself. Me and your mother are awful parents and all three of you deserve so much better. I'm sorry." . Patchpaw stared up at his father with a sparkle in bright green eyes. Though, Petal felt confusion swirling in her head, like irritating buzzing bees. "Sorry, doesn't cut it.", Petal muttered bitterly.

Appledusk dipped then head, "Then what do I have to do to make it up to you?".

Petal began tightly circling Shykit, who laid on the stone, staring at the floor as she spoke, "You can keep lying to yourself and having fake ceremonies- but we were exiled, we are not clan cats anymore. I'm not going to let those rules dictate who I can love or what my name is. However despite how much I hate the Clans after everything they've done to us, you need to go back.", she mewed, now directly facing Appledusk, "Three young kits are waiting for you there, that still need a father." .

Using her muzzle, Petal nudged Shykit into the cream tom's grasp, "Take Shykit back home and make sure you're the best father in history to both her, Applekit and Willowkit. No one else can through we what did.". Their attention soon started to drift towards the young warrior, Nettlebreeze, who still stood hunched up the cliff's edge, shivering and whimpering.

Appledusk attempted to approach him, "I'm sorry this had to happen to you, Nettlebreeze. I know it's har-". However, unsurprisingly, he gave a warning slash, falling short of Appledusk's chest, ordering him to keep his distance.

At the end of the day, Nettlebreeze was still a Thunderclan warrior and Appledusk was a trespassing rouge. "This has gone on long enough.", he bitterly responded, "You've got Shykit, so get her to Riverclan safely. I don't want to see you near Thunderclan territory again.". After that, he stalked off miserably, along the cliffside, grudgingly returning to the oak covered landscape of Thunderclan in the distance. Petal felt a stab on pity for the young tom, quickly turning on herself, sharing the same guilt of killing her parent as well, her own mother.

They watched the ginger cat disappear into the green shadows of the forest, before turning to Myler as he padded up behind them. Appledusk respectfully bowed his head low to the loner, "Thank you for everything, Myler. You're done more for my kin then I can ever repay.".

Though, Myler shook his head, the praise unnecessarily, "You don't owe me anything, really. What kind of cat would I be to ignore kits in danger? I choose to do this myself.", he mewed, purring. Appledusk's whiskers twitched happily. Patchpaw bounded up to his old friend, leaping like a baby bunny, "I'll miss the most after Petal, Myler!", he cheered, "Make sure you look after her!".

Myler nodded, "I'll miss you too, Patchaw. I promise I'll keep Petal safe.".

Appledusk dipped his head in thanks, gently taking the cream kit laying at his paws. With Petal unable to move. Patchpaw gave her a final nuzzle for good measure, his purr laced with whimpering.

Then there was a flash of emotion in Patchpaw's bright eyes as he suddenly twisted round to look at Appledusk, fur bristling, "Dad- what about Larchpaw? He has to know about this!", he exclaimed. Appledusk's spine bent until his muzzle almost touched the stone floor, "He'll just have to hear about at the Gathering, along with everyone else.". Bitter frost grew over Petal, knowing he deserved better, but as long as he remained within Shadowclan, it was the only place he could hear of this tragedy.

And with that, there was no more to say or do. Petal turned away, her brother's goodbyes filling her ears, "See you later, Petal! Good luck!". This made Petal's paws feel as heavy as mountains, needing to force each step, her paws beginning to drag, just to keep moving.

Myler wrapped his tail over her shoulders, trying to comfort her. Then all the boiling emotions, just caved in: She'd killed her mother and she would never see any of her kit again.

Petal's body locked up, everything, her muscles, heart and mind. Black fog beginning to consume the edges of her vision. She wanted to be sick. She just wanted to give in and faint. Yet, Myler kept

going; nudging her on, taking one step at a time, back to their home, far, far away.

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In a rather reckless decision on his father's part, they'd skipped being escorted in by a patrol and cut straight through Riverclan territory, to stroll into the camp themselves without even declaring their presence beforehand. Though it wasn't unfounded. It was rush against time. Steadily, Shykit's condition had gotten worse by the heartbeat. All the beaming energy usually from a kit of her age, completely drained. Now what was only left was an empty husk, floppy in Appledusk's jaws. Even the odd twitch was starting to become rare. The only contrast insurance to Patchpaw, that there was still a battle to fight, was the gentle rise and fall of Shykit's chest as she breathed shallowly.

They kept at a brisk pace, barely slowing down to catch their breath. Unable to afford themselves the luxury of rest, only forcing themselves on. Their journey, took them over large boulders, past the occasional stumpy tree, muddy plains and large bodies of gleaming water, sparkling like stars, as it caught the last of the sunlight.

The rims of the horizon struck with pale pink, while the centre glowed with a soft gold, the sunset fast approaching. The narrow leaf-bare windows of light tight and unsympathetic for langers, who failed to find themselves shelter for the harsh night ahead. There was a distinctive shift in the air, as it becomes crisp and sharp, like cold nettles pressing against his pelt. They needed hurry. Eventually, they were weaving amongst the largest reed of the whole territory, the Riverclan camp laying at its centre. The ground muddy and wet under Patchpaw's pads, like slimy toad skin.

In the endless sea of swishing grass, the two toms had expected to remain undiscovered, not until reaching the camp anyway. Yet here they were, yowls of fury consuming his sensitive hearing, rapidly surrounded, by what appeared to be a returning hunting patrol, fresh catches stuffing their faces. Patchpaw was unaware cats could even carry so much.

Three warriors and two apprentices, five opposites in all. Instantly recognizing, Eeltail and Perchpaw among them. The apprentice gazed at his former mentor with gleaming eyes, yet remained silent.

Each cat placed their respected prey to the side, tails swaying and fur ripping with suspension as they faced the intruders. Though not as aggressive as Patchpaw expected.

The elderly she-cat, Eeltail stepped forward, narrowed eyes, "You two better be here because of Shykit.", she warned, lips threatening to form into a snarl. Then Perchpaw's excited whale barged in, "They've got her!", he called out, spotting the tiny she-cat leaning against Appledusk's paws in the mud, barely awake.

Eeltail blinked several times, her mouth gaping open, "Starclan all mighty-", she cursed, "And I didn't want to believe Reedshine. The traitor actually pulled through.".

A glint of hope sparked inside the ginger and white kit, the possibility of being accepted into Riverclan become ever more apparent. Yet, a skinny black tom moved to the front of patrol, directly facing the exiles, a warrior called Rainfall if Patchpaw recalled correctly, "Just remember we're not Appledusk's welcoming party!", he reminded them, growling, "How do we know you weren't involved with Mapleshade luring the foxes t-".

"Mapleshade is dead. Along with Bloomheart.", Appledusk interrupted in a harsh tone. Instantly, Rainfall was shut up, a horrid dread and silence hanging over all the cats. Even Patchpaw, who tightened up from the sight of his mother disappearing below the rapid waves, forced under by his own sister. Finally, Eeltail spoke up, "How? W-what happened?", she questioned, her muscles tense.

Though, Appledusk just spoke his head, "That doesn't matter right now. Shykit is sick and we need to get her to Driftfur, immediately.", he explained, "Darkstar can deal with me herself.". Sharing warily glances, the patrol eventually nodded to each other. Flicking her tail, Eeltail ordered the warrior and apprentice, Milkfur and Volepaw on ahead, grabbing their share of fresh-kill, along with Eeltail's and Rainfall's, their mouths overflowing with fish, disappearing into the reeds. With only three left of the patrol,

Eeltail arched her ears towards camp, "Fine.", she puffed, clearly annoyed to be agreeing with the rouge, "Come on, then.".

Nodding, Appledusk leaned over to grab Shykit, but a sharp hiss stopped him. "Don't.", Eeltail ordered coldly, taking the scruff of the kit herself. Which Appledusk reluctantly accepted, even allowing the senior warrior to lead the way, Perchpaw and Rainfall following at the rear, enclosing them in. The fur on Patchpaw's neck bristled, seeing his helpless sister being carried by a stranger. What did Eeltail think of the kit she carried? Even if Shykit was Riverclan cat through and through unlike him, she still held the blood of a traitor. Wondering if Reedshine's litter mistreated because of it, just like his littermates were. Desperately hoping they weren't.

Feeling tense, he pressed close to his father, seeking his protection, knowing their presence would not be welcomed. Just begging in his mind they wouldn't be sent away again, after all that effort they did to get Shykit back and the thought of instantly being separated from her- would be awful. And the promise Appledusk made to Petal, to be the there for their half-siblings, when he wasn't there for them, he couldn't break that now.

Then, Patchpaw's ears pricked as Appledusk's attention turned to his former apprentice, beginning to chat away, "So who your mentor now?", Appledusk asked cheerfully, "It probably won't be long before you're a warrior.". There was an eagerness in his voice, suggesting a strong determination to catch up on the gossip that he'd miss that past few moons while in exile.

Perchpaw purred, falling in beside him, matching his stride, "It's Rainfall now.", tail pointing to the grumpy warrior behind them, "Says if we win the next big battle, I can get my full name.".

Appledusk's chest and fur puffed up in pride as if wind was ruffing it up, "Well it's about tim-". However, their ramblings were rudely halted as Rainfall barged through, separating them, making a barrier of black fur. "Quit that Perchpaw. This cat is a traitor to our Clan, don't forget that.", he warned his apprentice, who dropped his head in shame. Then Rainfall turned his attention to the cream tom, the tips of his fangs showing, "Just because you're visiting camp, doesn't mean your my clanmate.", he scowled, "You're still in exile

and you're our prisoner now. So keep quiet.". Even as a kit, Patchpaw could recognize the signs of his father fighting his own body, to prevent himself from showing any signs of aggression. Luckily, he contained himself, simply snorting and turning the other cheek.

Finally, they'd made to the thickly woven walls of the Riverclan camp, curving upwards to look like a giant hill crafted of reeds, similar to the golden hay mountains within Myler's Barn. Swallowing down the nerves, Patchpaw passed through the well-worn grass tunnel, in between two large bushes, into the camp beyond.

Just as he remembered; a sandy sloop, surrounded by thick reeds and scrawny sedges, an ancient slumping willow the only tree from all around. Surrounded on all sides by water, it's own isolated island. Serval cats lay scattered around the camp, sunbathing on the damp sand, trying to catch the last of the daylight. Ahead, Eeltail with Shykit, sped towards to a clump of sedge, patched up with branches and woven grass, creating a green cave, Patchpaw assuming it was the Medicine den. A young black and white she-cat, Echopaw came out to greet the elderly warrior, gasping as she spotted the precious bundle.

As Appledusk and Patchpaw fully stepped in to announce their presence, the pleasant atmosphere shifted to something tenser. The scent of uneasiness creeping into his nose. Everywhere, clanmates stopped and stared, either growling or simply surprised, all tails swaying.

As Rainfall padded past them, he flicked his sleek tail towards a bare patch of sandy soil, "Stay there.", he ordered. Before meeting up with a small band of his fellow warriors at the edge of the clearing, beginning to chatter among them, all unwelcoming.

Instantly, Perchpaw went to the Nursery, yowling his head off, "Reedshine! Reedshine!", he repeated, "It's Appledusk and Patchpaw! They've got Shykit!". A familiar voice whaled in pure joy, with the orange she-cat clambering out from the long grass. A wave of confusion, spread over Patchpaw as he watched Reedshine nuzzle Appledusk with a thick purr, while her mate just kept stiff,

his expression blank. For a heartbeat, he'd wished her ginger coat was tortoiseshell, wanting to see his parents be happy together, one last time.

Then, the excited Reedshine bounded around her them like a squirrel, "I told them-", Reedshine exclaimed, "I told them, you could do it!". Appledusk dipped his head, puffing up his chest proudly, "It's honour to see you again, Reedshine.", he greeted.

From behind his father, Patchpaw's head poked out, "Hi again.", he timidly mewed to Reedshine in a quiet voice. Pricking his ears, Patchpaw made the suspicious mutters and angered hisses of the surrounding cats, not quite drowned out by the wind. Tensing up, he decided to just focus on his own conversation while Reedshine drew back, her murky eyes now clouded over, "Where is she then?", sounding slightly desperate, "Where's my previous kit?".

Hurriedly, Patchpaw pointed out the Medicine den with his ginger tail, "Eeltail took her to the Medicine den.", he explained, "I don't think my Mum did a very good job of looking after her.", finishing his sentence with a sigh, still unable to process the crushing realization that she was most likely dead. "I see.", Reedshine growled, lashing her tail at the mention of his mother.

Luckily, her face softened to the true look of a gentle Queen as she glanced back up at Appledusk standing tall over her, gratefulness filling her voice, "I don't know how can thank you.", she purred, then turning to Patchpaw, "Both of you. H-how did you get her back?", shuffling towards the cream tom, burying her chin in his chest, gazing up longingly. Yet, Appledusk pushed her back with his thick tail, Reedshine blinking, "It will come clear in due time, dear.", he assured her, "But instead of fusing over us, there's a kit that needs their mother.".

After brushing her tail over his flank as one final sign of affection, Reedshine nodded and hurried over to the Medicine den. Surprisingly, Appledusk let off a sigh of relief and guilt, his gaze drifting into the darkening sky, deep in thought.

At the Nursery, small round heads peered out curiously, including two of Shykit's size, a grey tabby and pale brown. Willowkit and

Applekit. His heart skipped a beat, realizing this was the first time he'd seen the faces of his other half-siblings. Including Appledkit, the brother he'd named himself. Before he could take a step towards them, tails of Queens appeared round the corner of the entrance, gliding the kits back inside.

Patchpaw even overhearing an older she-cat, "Come along, little ones. We don't want you getting in the way of our warriors, do we?.", her voice stern yet understanding. There was a sudden hole in his chest, not remembering the last time his own mother had referred to him or his littermates as 'Little ones' or anything of that nature. Sadly, all the denmates of the Nursery disappeared into the gloom, vanishing from sight.

Yet, Patchpaw wasn't allowed to linger on it too long as the entire camp suddenly fell eerily silent, with two cats marching out from the roots of the willow. Of course, the slender yet sturdy frame of Darkstar approached her visitors, nose twitching cautiously. Yet strangely, it was Splashheart, who'd come to greet them first.

Since the last time he'd seen him, only a few days ago, the tom had changed; he now carried himself with a bit more purpose, head and tail raised in pride and an arrogant strut with each stride.

He halted in front of them, chest puffed up. Just then, something seemed to click in Appledusk's mind, his face twisting in disbelief, "Oh no- Please me you're not-.", he gasped. Spashfoot snorted, smirking with the cheekiness of an apprentice, "The new Riverclan deputy at your service.", he boasted. Really? Wasn't he a bit too young? Patchpaw thought, blinking. He just vaguely hoped Darkstar knew what she was doing, maybe there was more to the grey tom under the snooty exterior. Just really, really deep down.

"Thank you, Splashheart.", Darkstar mewed, standing between him and two outsiders, "But I can deal with things from here.". Spashheart mumbled under his breath, reluctantly nodding, wandering off. Just as Darkstar was about to address them, the silence was slowly disturbed by the gradual growing waves of mutters. Luckily, the Leader shut them all up with a signal stare. Signalling for them to follow, she padded away, "We should take this to my den.", she uttered.

As they weaved through the thick willow roots, into a layer of sedge, Appledusk fell into step with Darkstar, now out of earshot of all other cats. "Seriously?", he grumbled, "Out of every cat, you pick him? He can barely keep his own ego under control, let alone an entire clan!". Patchpaw couldn't help but snigger at the irony when it came out of his father's mouth.

After hearing that, Darkstar instantly halted, whirling round, baring her fangs, "Don't tell me how to do my job.", she warned, "Even if you brought back Shykit, you're still in exile. You can easily be escorted out if you push your luck.". Patchpaw flinched, terrified at the thought they could just be kicked out at any heartbeat after putting so much effect, to just get to this point. Seemly Darkstar noticed, suddenly becoming more gentle, dipping her head, "My apologies, Patchpaw.", she mewed quietly. He was about to ask her how she knew about his apprentice name, before remembering he'd told Reedshine and Spashheart beforehand.

Then, she climbed through the thick stems into her den, holding them aside for Patchpaw and his father. It was tight space, the air thick and dump too. Forcing Patchpaw to press against the wall, to allow all three cats enough space. Which was tricky, considering the walls were lined with swirling shells and pale smooth pebbles, almost glowing in the dim light. Riverclan cats allowing themselves to go beyond the necessities, something his mother would have never allowed. If she wasn't...

Darkstar spins a few times on the spot, before finally settling down into a plum nest of soft moss and fluffy feathers, "You're got a lot to explaining, Appledusk. Lies won't be tolerated. I'll ask your son to clarity if need be.", she pointed out, tail swaying.

Appledusk tightened up a bit, "I know.", he muttered. So, he began the long tale of Mapleshade's slow descent into her murderous rampage: How she tore Ravenwing's throat, almost choked her mate, threw Dawnfeather into the Thunderpath and finally the kidnapping of Shykit.

Darkstar was reluctant to believe Appledusk wholeheartedly, forcing Patchkit to testify his father's innocence. It made sense that Darkstar was extra defensive - Riverclan had been targetted by

Mapleshade, not just Thunderclan. If Patchkit recalled correctly, the old deputy, Spikefur had died when the foxes got lured to the camp. Although he only met him once, Patchkit recalled fondly that Spiketail vouched for his family to stay Riverclan, after Oakstar exiled them. If only Darkstar had accepted them the first time round - Perhaps Mapleshade wouldn't have snapped.

"I've noticed you've only brought Patchkit.", Darkstar uttered to Appledusk, "What about your other kits? I can assure, I won't play favourites. I'll consider all your kits if they want to join Riverclan.".

Appledusk clawed the gritty sand under his paws, "My other kits have made their own chooses. Larchkit has already joined Shadowclan, so we can for his final decision at the next Gathering. As Petalkit- She's living as a loner now and doesn't want anything to do with the Clans."

Patchpaw half expected Darkstar to growl at her former warrior at his defiance. Yet, instead, she just gave a nod, "We'll have to tread carefully around Shadowclan - As for your daughter, we won't bother her if she wishes to remain anonymous. I don't blame her to be honest.".

Then, her attention drifted to the floor, taking a deep breath as if mentally preparing herself for what she was about to hear, lifting her head again, now deadly serious. "Now to the present - From what I hear from Milkfur, when you got Shykit back, both Mapleshade and Bloomheart died.", she mewed thoughtfully, "What in Starclan's name happened?".

Appledusk began to tell the gruesome tale, "After Reedshine and Spashheart told us about the kidnapping, me and Patchpaw went to Petal to see if she'd seen anything.", he explained. Patchpaw couldn't help but notice he purposefully left out the detail of Petal being blinded by Mapleshade.

Appledusk then carried on, "They didn't know but they still joined us in the hunt. Eventually, I managed to track down Mapleshade's and Shykit's scent near the northern Thunderclan border. We found Mapleshade fighting with Bloomheart, while Nettlebreeze watched,

holding Shykit.".

"Did Nettlebreeze hurt her?", Darkstar abruptly accused fur spiking. Angered at the thought that a Thunderclan Warrior would harm one of her Clan's kits. Hurriedly, Patchpaw shook his head, "No.", he objected, "Nettlebreeze didn't lay a claw on her!". Remembering the fold memories of him back in Thunderclan, while he was an apprentice and they were still in the Nursery. However, Appledusk slapped his tail over his open jaw, shutting him up before he could ruin anything.

Luckily, Darkstar was willing to ignore the kit's outburst, allowing Appledusk to hurry on without argument. The cream tom started again, "We managed to get Nettlebreeze and Bloomheart to hand Shykit over without a fight. However, Bloomheart insisted that we'd stay to watch him kill Mapleshade. Which is when Nettlebreeze and Petal turned on their own parents, shoving them into Gorge river.".

Physically, Patchpaw could see the shiver run down Darkstar's spine as her dark fur rippled.

"Just one more question.", she muttered quietly, a dramatic shift in the den's atmosphere, "I can see why Petal may have done that. But why Nettlebreeze? What's Bloomheart involvement in all of this?".

The fur on the back of his neck rose, his body shuddering. Where could they even begin with him? His father made it short, "Ever since Bloomheart discovered my kits are half-clan, he's made it his life mission to kill them off. Even killing Frecklewish for getting in the way. Finally, Nettlebreeze grew too disgusted of his father's actions.". That wasn't even half the story, Patchpaw thought.

Darkstar let off a sad chuckle, " It's a waste.", she muttered, "Let's just pray to Starclan, they'll be the last warriors the Dark Forest will be receiving.". Strangely, Appledusk shuddered violently on the spot, tail bristling. The Dark Forest? No one ever told him anything like that. If Starclan was the place for good cats- was the Dark Forest for the bad ones? But that didn't make any sense. Mapleshade and Bloomheart had friends and kin, cats who relied on and loved them. Starclan wouldn't separate them, surely? Horror crept up his throat as the bile did, but he rapidly forced it down.

Shrugging it off, before the dark thoughts could consume his mind.

After a long hanging silence, Darkstar finally broke it with a sigh, "I've heard enough.", she announced, sitting up, "I realize now, we are in a great debt to you after getting Shykit back alive from Mapleshade. So I'll willing to give you another chance. Patchpaw is also welcomed". That was like birdsong to Patchpaw, a massive beam of excitement threatening to make him leapt for joy, making a mockery of himself, that he just barely held down. Similar reaction to Appledusk, his throat tumbling in a purr. Though Darkstar wasn't quite done, warning him, "But you still must work hard to earn your place back into the Clan.".

Though this did little to shift Appledusk's good mood, only dipping his head, "I understand, Darkstar.", he acknowledged, "Thank you.". Darkstar only nodded as she rose from her bedding, making her two guests to shuffle around as she climbed out of the narrow den.

Following her out, Darkstar finally showed Appledusk some sympathy, "Since everything been cleared up now, I must admit, I'm impressed, Appledusk. You maintained your honour as a rogue when your mate couldn't. Then what you did for Shykit, you've redeemed yourself to Riverclan."

As Patchpaw listened to everything, he couldn't help but feel a stab of annoyance. Abruptly halting and facing the leader directly, "What about me and my littermates? What did we have to redeem ourselves for? Being born? If you'd just let us join Riverclan the first time, none of this would've of happened!".

Appledusk flinched. Quickly, stepping forward, about take his son by the scruff and drag him away. Luckily, Darkstar placed her tail on his chest, blocking him. Willing to address her mistake, "It was a cruel decision on my part. I'm sorry. I genuinely thought a Half-Clan family would be safer as rogues - Away from clan cats constantly questioning their loyalties. Your parents are capable warriors, skilled enough to raise kits after all. I never expected Mapleshade to... Snap.".

"None of us did.", Patchkit quietly agreed. Those words alone weren't enough for Patchpaw to forgive Darkstar yet, however, he

just let his anger slip away, letting numbness set in. After all that happened, he just wanted to have a place he could call home. He was too exhausted to fight or argue anymore, even if injustice still reined.

With that, Darkstar start to address her clanmates, calling a Clan meeting unnecessarily, with most of Riverclan already gathering in the sandy clearing, "Appledusk and his kit have managed to receive Shykit, with Mapleshade dying in the struggle!", she announced loudly. There were a few gasps from those who haven't heard of his mother's demise yet, while others just quietly discussed it among their respective groups. With Spashheart splitting from the crowd, joining his leader's side.

Darkstar flicked her tail towards the new members, "Because of this, Appledusk has earned another chance to prove his loyalty. He will be allowed to become a member of Riverclan once more. Though a close eye will be kept on him.", her yell echoing through the camp. This was greeted by a mix of reactions, some pleasantly nodding to their old clanmate, some scoffed while others just simply remained silent, unsure how to feel.

Though Darkstar wasn't done, raising her tail for silence, "Alongside his son, Patchpaw, will also be joining our ranks. But just remember, that he's not responsible for the crimes of his parents. Treat him like any other clanmate.", she warned sternly, getting many nods in reply.

Suddenly, she hauled herself onto the lowest branch of the willow, perching on it and gazing down at them like an owl spying prey. Her black pelt was a solid shadow against the twilight sky, now striking with purples and blues. Holding her head up, she looked to the heavens, "By the power insisted in me by Starclan, I welcome you as official members of Riverclan.", she mewed. Pure joy surged through him. A new apprentice of Riverclan. Catching Perchpaw's eye among the long rows of cats, his heart pounded. Thinking of all the battle moves he could learn from his father's former apprentice.

Then Darkstar started shuffling round on her branch to face Patchpaw. A new Mentor? "Until you are old enough to properly receive your apprentice name, I revert your name back Patchkit.",

she declared, "Where you shall move back into the Nursery and live out the rest of your kithood.".

"What?", Patchkit gasped, horrified. Hurriedly, he whipped around for Appledusk's back up, yet his father just shrugged, "You'll get it back soon, anyway.". A wave of dismay rippled through the kit's fur, annoyed and embarrassed. Feeling his new clanmates' judging gaze burning into him, as he helplessly searched the crowd for some support. His ears then pricked as realized Splashheart was speaking to him, "I get it's annoying, but as long as you are a kit, you shall remain that way. We must follow the code.", he explained, "And anyway, after everything you've been through, you need to enjoy the last of your kithood while you still can.".

Patchkit's heart sank like a pebble, groaning as he had to reluctantly accept reality. He barely made out Darkstar's speaking again amongst his muffled senses, "Patchkit will need a new mother. Are any of the Queens willing to take him in?". It surprised no one who stepped forward, her demates already separating to let her through. With clear hesitation, Reedshine edged towards the calico kit, force in her movement. She stood over him, blinking in greeting, before nodding at Darkstar, "I'll take him in.".

Next to them, Appledusk's lime eyes sparked at Reedshine like a newleaf grass blade covered in fresh dew. Above, Darkstar showed her gratefulness for the orange she-cat, "You are doing you're a Clan a great service.".

With nothing else to do, Darkstar lunged down from the branch, "Welcome back.", she mewed as she swept past them, retreating back into her den. Soon, his old clanmates began swarming around Appledusk, erupting into loud greetings and assumptions, a storm of noise. His father seemed overwhelmed, struggling to address everyone at once. They gave Patchkit no notice as if he was only dust. Only Reedshine sat next to him, wrapping her fluffy tail around him.

Then surprisingly, the deputy stepped out from the mass of pelts, approaching them. "Thank you for doing this.", Splashheart mewed, nodding to his mentor, Reedshine returning the friendly gesture. He then leaned towards Patchkit, whispering, "Just to warn you now,

she snores louder than thunder.", he smirked. Patchkit could only blink at him. "I'm not deaf, you know.", Reedshine interrupted above, offended.

Spashheart quicked ducked away before Reedshine could scold him further, calling out to Patchkit as he padded away, "Don't sweat it, kit. You need any help, you know where to find me!", disappearing into the seas of the large crowd again. The orange queen lay her tail over Patchkit's shoulders, gliding Patchkit from the racket and bustle of the main clearing, moving towards the Nursery.

"How's Shykit?", he asked softly. Reedshine could only shrug, clearly not trying to think about it too much, "She's developing the first stages of Greencough. Driftfur confident she'll recover but nothing certain yet.". After a pause, she swiftly changed the topic, "It's about time you meet your new denmates.", she purred, "And you're new siblings.".

The heartbeat in his chest thundered. Completely unprepared.

Before he could do anything, Reedhine called into the gloom of the huge den, "Willowkit, Applekit! Come meet your father and new brother!".

Epilogue

An owl screeched high from above, somewhere in the void of the night. The newly named, Shyheart had expected that to jerk her right awake. Kind of wishing it did. Yet, the doziness continued to blur her vision. Pricking her ears, she made out the muffled heavy breathing and snoring of her slumbering clanmates, tucked away in their comfy dens. While she was stuck out outside, expected to last without a moment of rest. Her littermates had gotten their names a whole two and half moons before her, because apparently, she wasn't 'mature' enough back then. Now they could sleep to their heart's content. Luckily furballs.

Despite the sun shrinking below horizon ages ago, the air was still humid and stuffy, late Greenleaf not being kind to them. Letting off a gaping yawn, she shuffled around on the sandy spot, crouched at the camp entrance. Every blade of grass and drop of water was tinted in the pale moonlight, the whole landscape glowing a frosty silver. Eying the calm shimmering water, Shyheart wondering if she gets away with a quick midnight paddle. Maybe it would wake her up a bit. Though decided it wasn't worth the risk.

The soft sound of paws against sand caught her attention, as two cats crossed the clearing for a late-night hunt. Willownose and Splashstar were chasing each other around like apprentices, purring like mad. Shyheart eyes them suspiciously. Those two had seemed to be getting awfully close recently.

Shyheart gave them a funny look, ear twitching. Her sister gave Shyheart a nervous glance, hot with embarrassment. With a playful sigh, Shyheart shuffled aside to let the lovebirds out, into the wide territory beyond. "Have fun you two.", Shyheart cheered joyfully, as they disappeared into the gloom of the tunnel. From somewhere beyond the thick walls, she made out Splashstar's late reply, in a mocking voice, "No talking remember!".

With a huff, Shyheart flopped back onto the floor. Telling her not to talk, was like telling a mole not to dig, it was borderline impossible.

The sun still nowhere in sight. This was going to be a very long night. Reluctantly, she continued to sit vigil. Trying to keep her senses sharp. Annoyingly, her focus wasn't enough, her eyes and mind beginning to wonder. Her parents' furious arguments still ringing in her ears from the half moon before.

Ever since her father's return from exile, just after her birth, he'd always been unfocused. On patrols, he'd constantly gazed out into the wide-open world beyond the borders, longingly. Whenever, they'd passed the Gorge River, he'd always subtly flinch, clearing thinking of his precious mate, Mapleshade, if she remembered correctly - the mother of her half-siblings, including Patchleaf. She always wondered if Patchleaf felt he truly belonged in Riverclan, with his old family either living away or deceased. Shyheart hoped she was doing enough to support him.

Naturally, she began to wonder about her other half-brother, Larchcloud. Where was he now? It had come to a shock to all of them, when he finally snapped under the constant torment of Shadowclan for his murderous mother. Lashing out against the last two cats that said a bad word against him, two young apprentices, neither of them surviving. Larchcloud had just been unable to escape his violent influences as a young kit. The whole litter had more trauma in their kittenhood than any cat should experience. his Ever since then, he'd been a minor nuisance to all the Clans, until disappearing for good. There is no new sightings of him for a quite a while now. Hopefully, he'd settled somewhere and led a better life. Maybe with their sister, Petal.

That had seemed to the final straw for her parents. Honestly, Shyheart was surprised it hadn't happened earlier. Maybe her mother being too tolerant for her own good. Just as the first few grey flakes of old age appeared on her nuzzle, at last Reedshine confronted her distracted mate, unable to stand him behaviour any more. The two of them splitting up quite recently, shaking up her entire kin. Starting to wonder, if that's why her warrior name had to be displayed. Too caught up in the family drama.

Unable to fight it, her head turned light and floppy, shrinking into the depths of her chest fur. Eventually, the battle between as wakefulness and tiredness was lost, as her vision and hearing

continued to blur, sleep consuming her.

Suddenly, Shyheart was eerily aware that something wasn't right. While her eyes were still closed, the world seemed to shift, almost stretching outwards. Before she knew it, weightlessness came over her, as if a feather floating down gently in a breeze. Then ground formed under her again. The texture of crusty, cracked sand melted away, to be replaced with solid, musty and damp mud.

Abruptly, Shyheart's head snapped back, alarmed to find where she was. Instantly, Shyheart was on her paws, frantically searching the pure black landscape, vast and empty. Instead of the woven reeds and sandy hollow of Riverclan camp, she saw something else entirely, surrounding her on all sides. Trees, unspeakably tall, reached up into the sky. With thick claw-like branches, so high, it was impossible to make out what lay beyond the canopy. Putting the pines of Shadowclan to utter shame. The pale moonlight that once set alight the landscape, was now replaced by a sickly green glow, radiating from slimy mushrooms, that coiled around trees and logs, like snakes.

Yet somehow, the limelight was nothing compared to the thick darkness that still managed to fester from every crack and burrow, the green glow unable to even pierce it. Shadows cast were unnaturally long and slender, their edges sharp. The darkness was so dense, it had it's own texture, like a purple fog, suffocating. Thin ghostly vapour, glided over the doggy ground, twisting, curling and turning in on itself, as if it was in pain. Snaking up her legs as if white spider talons were trying to drag her down into the dead earth. The overpowering odour of rotting flesh and plant decay made Shyheart want to be sick.

There was no blast of gales or gentle blowing of breezes. Instead, there was only a bellowing silence, echoing among the branches. It hangover her like a haunting force, constantly keeping her on edge, never allowing her to slip into relaxation. The silence continued to drone, like ill hog trying to breathe. It tempted to form into dreading whispers, nipping at her ears, yet failed to create words, only able to groan and moan.

How was this possible? She'd just nodded off for a heartbeat. How

could she end up in an entirely different territory?

Then, her tail spiked up. Shrivelled ferns rustled as a cat stalked out from the layer of grimy undergrowth. With a dull tortoiseshell she-cat, ragged and old, crept towards her. Flinching, when she realized they weren't alone, a second cat stepping out from behind the fierce she-cat, a mottled sturdy tom, with spiky dark fur. A gasp of horror escaped Shyheart's open mouth. Larchcloud. The determined fire in his amber eyes now extinguished, only bleakness and hopelessness left.

Now the mysterious she-cat now stood directly in front of her, Shyheart too speechless to threaten or warn her to back off. A marvellous grin come over the rouge's face, "It's been a long time, Shyheart.", Mapleshade greeted.